

Marcel Ray Duriez

Whisper

Interval: 1 Ansley

Rousing up with him- Rockville November 19, 1852- I will ponder your obligation salaried in filled if you get my young girl with a youngster.

Ranald Demure, the fourth King of Ansley, thrashed to quintessence as he sat spread-eagled in a relaxed armchair in the well-equipped lending library.

He had been downing excellent moonshine ever since his arrival at the Marquees of Welford's country estate for his once mythical chase.

Afterward three hours or more, they were both well into their cups, so-o surely, he had misinterpreted.

Does your silence show your acceptance of the terms?

Welford asked.

Ansley studied his cousin, that he was fonder of then he would ever let on, yet more a longtime friend, over that how it had to be, sitting in that damned wood wheelchair, where he himself had placed the marquees four years formerly.

Ansley released a dark chuckle. I have had far too much to drink. You would not countenance what I thought you uttered. Welford had aged during that time, his Black hair had gone white at the temples, his Black eyes somber enough to chase off any cheerfulness in the room.

Jannie wants a child, I cannot give it to her, it would not be right to have loving making at her age. You owe me this, even if your age and even if you are related.

Ansley pushed himself out of the chair. He had wondered but never dared ask the full extent of Welford's damages.

They had seen each other seldom in the intervening years, that heart-rending evening a guilty barricade between them. I owe you your legs.

He had meant to do so with force. Instead, he astonished and almost lost his equilibrium as he crisscrossed over to the hearth.

Inwardly, Ansley flinched, but he allowed none of his rioting emotions to escape his calm facade. Instead, he concentrated more intently on the fire.

He pressed his forearm against the stone mantel to steady himself while he studied the madly dancing flames. Within them, he could almost see the night he and Welford had been barreling wildly through the Rockville streets, the curricule traveling at a dangerous breakneck speed.

Not my seed. You owe me a bloody cock! And Ansley, who was always so damned responsible, managed to destroy a good man's life. And a lovely girl. And his own, if he was authentic about it.

The flames yellow, red, and orange, like- spun in a macabre dance, no doubt a preview of what his time without end would most definitely entail.

Writing within them for his sins, his poor judgment. He had been all of five and twenty. A cursed age for him and his brothers. Westcliffe married at twenty-five and was betrayed. Stephen marched off to war, only to return a lost man.

They had been in Rockville having an enjoyable time when Jannie was finally with child, carrying Welford's heir. Ansley felt as though his heart had been scored with a thousand breadknives.

Are you telling me that you cannot ...that your He peered over at Welford? He owed it to his childhood friend to at least hold his gaze when he asked. That you cannot bed her?

I have no feeling. Welford pounded his thighs, slammed a fist between his legs with enough force to make Ansley cringe and the chair creak. No feeling. She is tired, bless her, she is tried to make it work ...but all it does is cause her to weep.

I feel remarkably old at twenty-eight, Welford, three years Ansley's senior, remarked. I want to feel young again.

So, they drank and drank and drank. And although Welford was married, they even visited the beds of a couple of lovelies. Ansley had never understood Welford partaking in the latter entertainment.

If Jannie were his wife Jannie would never agree to this mad notion of yours. She despises me.

He hardly blamed her for her attitude toward him. In grief over her husband's near-death and debilitating injuries, she had lost the child. Now she had no hope of ever having another. She was the sort of girl who should never be denied anything her heart desired. It was his second thought upon being introduced to her at the betrothal dinner that had been held in her and Welford's honor: If you were mine, you would never do without. His first thought had been that he wished he had met her before Welford, so certain was he that he would have been able to charm her in his arms. She was the loveliest girl upon whom he had ever set eyes. Grace and poise mirrored her every step. When she smiled, she made a man feel as though he were all that mattered.

In no hurry to marry, Ansley had avoided the soirees of Season's past whenever possible. Thus, he had missed the opportunity to meet and court Lady Jannie Spencer. Although to hear Welford tell it, he snagged her heart during their first dance.

You have a reputation for charming women. Apply your talents to my wife, Welford said now, each word biting, clipped, as though forced between clenched teeth. You want me to seduce her?

I want you to give her what I cannot.

This is ludicrous. Ansley shoved himself away from the fireplace, dropped back into the chair, which had suddenly become unbearably uncomfortable, rose, and stalked to the window. Unsettled, he refused to acknowledge how often he had dreamed of Jannie, but he had never acted upon his interest. He lived his life by a code of chivalry passed down from his ancestors who had fought alongside Richard the Lionheart during the crusades. He did not take women who belonged to others. Does she consent to this preposterous scheme of yours?

I have not yet discussed it with her. I wanted to ensure you agreed with it before I did.

He faced a man he no longer knew. Had Welford's affliction driven him mad? I can predict her answer with unerring accuracy. She will laugh, she will slap my face, and then she will weep. Not to mention the legal ramifications. If she gives birth to a boy, he will inherit. Even if all of England knows you are not his sire, you will be legally bound.

You and I are not only friends but cousins. We both carry the Demure blood. It would not be such an offense.

The cousin who is next to your title might disagree.

Syphilis is causing him to lose his mind. Besides, do you honestly believe that every prince who sat upon the throne and became king was truly his father's son? I doubt it. And I do not care about blood as much as I care about Jannie and seeing that she is happy.

But what of him? Ansley wondered. To have a child whom he could never acknowledge. Did he owe his cousin such a sacrifice? Although his recollections were a blur, he knew he had been driving the curricule. When it toppled, he was thrown clear, his only souvenir from the incident a thin scar that bisected the left side of his chin. Welford had somehow managed to get caught up in the rigging. When everything finally came to a thundering halt, he had been broken. Ghastly. Irrevocably. Broken.

With so much liquor coursing through their veins, neither of them remembered the infinite details. They knew only that Ansley walked away with one small scratch and Welford never walked again.

If I decline your invitation to bed with your lovely wife? Ansley asked quietly, the abhorrence of being placed in this position tautening his gut. He had never taken a married girl to his bed. Even the thought was repugnant. He believed

in having a jolly enjoyable time with any willing girl if she had no husband to whom she owed her loyalty. He was a man who honored duty and vows. He held others to his high standard.

I will simply ask someone else. And my wife could very well have a miserable night of it. But you, you have always had a reputation for being a remarkable lover. You could provide her with a night to remember. She would not welcome my touch.

I've no doubt you could change her mind on that score.

You seem to have discounted the importance of her not fancying me.

Not at all. I consider it to our advantage that she does not think well of you. It would reduce the encounter to a transaction. Unemotional. Detached. But knowing you, you would find a way to give her pleasure and that would be my gift to her as well. She has had three years of celibacy. She has never complained, bless her, but she was all the twenty-two years when joy was brutally stolen from her because of our poor choices. Why should she continue to suffer and pay the price for our sins? A night in the arms of Rockville's most reputed lover? Nine months later a babe suckling at her breast.

You give my reputation too much credit. Even I cannot guarantee conception with only one encounter.

Welford shrugged haplessly. Shoulders that had once been sturdy seemed lost within his finely cut jacket. A month, then. Someplace quiet, discreet.

The answers came much too quickly, without hesitation, as though they had previously engaged in the argument. You have given this considerable thought.

It is all I think about. How to bring happiness to my wife. You owe me this, Ansley. You owe her. She will never agree to it.

But if she does?

Before he could respond, the library door opened and the woman in question strolled in. The first time he saw her, she had been smiling, her blue eyes alight with joy, her beauty transcendent. Now it was as though a shadow had fallen over her. She was small and delicate, much too delicate for the burdens she presently carried.

She avoided looking at Ansley as she approached her husband. Her black hair was upswept. Flowing back and tucked neatly into place was the river of white she had acquired near her temple three years ago, as she dealt with the loss of her babe and her husband's mobility. Her violet gown outlined her slender frame to perfection, and Ansley had an unconscionable and unforgivable vision of easing that gown off her shoulders and skimming his mouth over her creamy skin. She would not consent. He knew she would not consent. He was a blackguard to give

even a second thought to how he would carry her into a sensual realm where only pleasure existed.

She was his friend's wife, for God's sake, and Welford, wallowing in that damned wheelchair, simply was not thinking properly. Jannie would set him straight right quick, and then she would no doubt hold Ansley responsible for her husband's ludicrous suggestion.

Smiling softly, she bent at the waist and pressed a light kiss to Welford's cheek. Hello, darling.

When she straightened, she gazed at Ansley as though he were a bit of excrement, she had recently scraped off the bottom of her shoe. Your Grace.

He bowed slightly. Lady Welford. May I say that you look lovely? You may say whatever you wish.

For him, she had no smile, no soft eyes, and no gentle tone. Welford had indeed lost his mind if he thought his wife was going to welcome any sort of intimacy from Ansley. He suspected she would derive more pleasure from ramming a dagger through his heart than from experiencing his practiced touch. Dinner awaits, men.

Good, I am quite famished, Welford announced. Ansley, will you escort my wife into dinner?

Her eyes as they met Ansley's held a challenge and more. He knew she wanted to remind him of what his foolishness had wrought as though he could ever forget it. Knowing he was accountable, the guilt gnawed at him like a ravenous dog with a bone.

I do not need an escort, she said quickly. However, Randall is not presently accessible, so perhaps His Grace would be kind enough to aid you.

It would be my honor, he responded succinctly, striding toward Welford. He did not want to contemplate the hell that awaited him if she consented to her husband's stupid notion to get her with the child.

As he pushed the chair forward, he was surprised to discover how much lighter it was than he remembered.

His friend was frailer than he had realized.

His guilt increased when he found himself enticed by the lure of Jannie's hips gently swaying as she preceded them from the room.

She had not been pleased when Welford told her that he invited the King to arrive a day earlier than the rest of their guests so they might have some private time together.

Sitting at her vanity several hours later, Jannie Demure, Marchioness of Wilford, brushed her hair, marveling that she had managed to sit through dinner without making any horrible comments to Ansley.

That he still saw the man at all astounded her. She could not forgive Ansley for the thoughtless disregard with which he lived his life.

Her stomach cramped with the reminder of what she had lost due to his selfish actions, and his desire for indulging in all sinful pleasures. Her babe and the man whom her husband had been.

Each time she first set eyes upon him, it was like receiving a solid blow to the chest, nearly crippling her with its force.

She had never deluded herself into believing it was anything other than the sizable dowry that had first attracted Welford to her.

His coffers were quite empty when he began to court her, but it had not taken long for him to win her heart as well as her hand in marriage.

Theirs had been a comfortable arrangement. She was fortunate. They were compatible. They cared for each other. They enjoyed each other's company. They never argued. She managed his household. He visited his clubs. Life had been calm, pleasant.

Four years into their marriage, she found herself with the child.

She had been three months when she finally told Wilford, who promptly went off to boast about it to her longtime friend and cousin, the King of Ansley.

She was unfamiliar with what followed. She knew only that both men had celebrated the good news with far too much drink and a dash through the Rockville streets that cost her husband his legs and his ability to sire another child.

The grief of his injuries, the strain of caring for him, the emotional turmoil of accepting how their lives were affected, had all been too much. She lost the child. His one hope for an heir. Her one hope to be a mother.

Her resentment of the man. The way things had been before that horrendous night when everything went wrong. How any chance for true happiness was now lost.

How hard she fought not to let her husband know how dreadfully despondent she was. Tonight, with Ansley sitting at their dining table, so much had come rushing back.

He no longer had a need for wishes, because he already owned everything his heart would forever desire. While the children gazed at the heavens, he sought his own heaven, lowering his mouth to Jannie's and kissing her deeply.

I think that would have happened without any wishes. I love you so much, Ansley.

You sound quite sure of yourself, Jannie said.

Wrapping his arm around her, he drew her in against his side, where she belonged. Where she would always belong. I have proof. The first time that we gazed at the stars at Blackmon, I wished that you would love me.

Will, it comes true, Papa? Zakaria asked. Absolutely...

Why, child, now you think about what your heart desires and you wish for it.

What do I do here and now? A falling star... I spied one.

He glanced around at Westcliffe holding Claire, Stephen with his arm around Mercy, and his mother snuggled against Leo's side. They would all have taken different journeys to get here, but here they were. And he was glad of it, uncle? Yes, Nephew, hopefully, they will learn that there is so-o much they can reach for.

I for one believe the assistants are a success, she said. Standing, he smiled as Jannie meandered over to him. Not, but. Now search for the stars. Ansley knelt beside Zakaria and helped him noble through his telescope. Do you see the moon, yet and it shilling at me, I feel as if I could touch it with my hand

outreached? I- we- us- stood with Lenny, all of them with smiles as bright as the moon.

An hour later, each child had unpacked her telescope. Still holding Annie, in his arms. Nearby his mother, see and looking... Hustled in their coats, searching for falling stars, with their parents supervisory them in their puppy love, they were now gazing at the heavens in wonder, not just in the above world but the worlds in them that wanted to explore too.

Small ones that would fit in their hands. The one he had inherited from his father he would give to Zakaria someday. But not yet.

Tell you what, Waverly. If I can select the gift to be unwrapped, then one gift shall be opened tonight. The child narrowed his eyes and then nodded. Then let us get to it. You may open the gift from your aunt Jannie and myself. He had purchased telescopes for each of the children.

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He had mastered the gesture only a few months earlier. I believe we should all be allowed to unwrap one gift before going to bed. I discussed the matter with my siblings, as well as my cousins, and they are all in agreement. Is that what you got him...? More soldiers...? He likes to play with his soldiers. Thinking of going into the military, are you? No, but Rife will. We do not run a democracy

here, Nephew. No, but you are being more than. Viscount Waverly expertly arched a brow at him. Do you know?

She climbed up the steps to the bed, slipped beneath the covers and nestled against him. He wrapped his arm protectively around her, pressing her firmly to his side, her face cradled within the curve of his shoulder.

She did not want to think about all the nights he had come to her when they were first married. After his accident, when he regained some strength, she had lain in her lonely bed night after night, waiting for his return. But he never again came, as though if he could not make love to her, he saw no point in being with her. But sometimes she just needed to be held, and when those moments came, she slipped into his bed.

And my body his. She could not prevent the cutting words from slicing between them. What passed between a man and a girl beneath the sheets was such an intimate act how could he bear the thought of Ansley meaningful about her what only Welford had ever known?

No, they will not. I have never published an advert in the Times stating my limitations. Oh, there will be speculation, of course, but we can quell that easily enough once people see how thrilled I am that you are with a child. And if it is a boy? Then I shall have my heir. But he will not carry your blood, that is what we need here.

May I stay with you for a while? Sweetheart, you never must ask anything of me. Taking a deep breath, she opened the door and walked through the bathing chamber to the adjacent room. It was dark except for the moonlight spilling in through mullioned windows.

She could see the shallow outline of her husband's form resting on the bed, beneath the blankets. Sometimes she feared he would wither away into nothing. She tiptoed over the carpet. Welford? She whispered quietly.

Jannie, is everything all, right? She heard the rustle of the feathered pillow as he turned his head. Of course, it was not. It had not been for three long years. Not to simply hold her. He needed help getting into the high bed that she had to use steps to clamber into. It unmanned him. She knew that. She took such great pains not to make him feel less than what he once had been.

Setting aside the brush, she rose from the chair and walked to the door that separated her bedchamber from his, a door he no longer used. He never came to her. Never. Not to say good night.

She rubbed her feet against his thin calf. I am sorry... My feet are cold. It does not matter. I cannot feel them.

He said it without emotion, as though it was more than his lower body that had no awareness, as though his very soul had become paralyzed as well.

She could not remember the last time she had heard him laugh. His now rare smiles always held a hint of sadness. But then she supposed hers did as well. You seem quiet and stanchly tonight, she said softly. Shall I cancel the house party? Nope, no, not. It will serve us well to have visitors.

He began to absently stroke her arm. She closed her eyes and relished the gentle caress, fighting back the guilt because sometimes it was difficult to be content with only this.

Jannie...?

Hum...?

'I was talking with Ansley earlier...' well, I should hope so, since you wanted him to arrive before any of our other guests.

I appreciate your indulgence. He kissed the top of her head. Her stomach tightened. How she wanted to turn her face up toward him and have him kiss her. Truly kiss her. The way he once had. As though his life had depended on it. But knowing he could not finish what they might have begun to stop her cold. It was too painful to be reminded of what they would never again have, so she pretended she no longer yearned for it.

Nevertheless, he said after a time, I was thinking ...he could take you with the child.

She froze, her lungs not even working to draw in air. She was surprised her heart continued to pound. She knew it did because she could hear the blood rushing, roaring between her ears. are you ...you cannot be ...are you suggesting I take him as my lover? for a brief time, yes.

She shoved herself to a sitting position and glared at him, for all the good it did with the shadows hiding the details of their features. Have you gone daft? No, I do not believe so.

Well, I must wholeheartedly disagree. She quickly scrambled out of the bed, nearly tripping in her haste to escape' as though distance could lessen the abhorrence of the words he had uttered. if I wanted a lover,

I would choose him myself, and he certainly would not be Ansley.

5

(Christmas Eve, 1845)

Ansley had invited his family to spend Christmas at his estate this year. Jannie had seen that everything was done to perfection: the tree, the trimmings, the meals. She was a gracious host, and he could not deny the pride he felt at her accomplishments. Holding his soon to be two-year-old daughter, Annie, on his lap while his son, nieces, nephews, and recently acquired dog played around him, he thought he had never known such contentment.

When they went to Rockville for the Season, they always hosted a ball. In the beginning, they were the talk of the Town. Their hasty marriage had been the fodder for gossip. His claiming Zakaria as his son sparked further rumors. But as he had predicted, everything eventually died down, and now he and Jannie were discussed as though they were the characters of some fairy tale who lived happily ever after' if they were spoken of at all.

Other gossip reigned. Ms. Black married a viscount who made it clear that he would see her daughters properly situated in society. Ansley and Jannie had attended the wedding. He could say with absolute certainty that Ms. Black had chosen well. She was happy and loved.

His mother alighted gracefully in the chair beside his. I am not certain when you boys were growing up that Christmas was ever quite so jolly. My sons have a gift for bringing joy to others.

It is easy enough to do when one is happy in oneself.

I would be much happier if someone were to tell me what Lenny is giving me for Christmas. Obviously, the size and shape tell me that it is a painting, but a painting of what exactly?

Of the entire family circled around his mother. Lenny had done it bit by bit with such skill that it was impossible to tell that the family had not all been

gathered in one place but had their individual portions done within their own homes.

Some surprises are good, Mother. They keep you young. Lenny keeps me young. She glanced around the room. I had no idea, at the age of sixteen, when I was so terrified at the thought of marrying Westcliffe's father, that I would take such a wondrous journey and acquire so much for which to be thankful.

It was not always easy.

no, but then it makes everything that much better when we acquire all that we want. And right this minute, Lady Annie, I need a curious child to come looks at the tree with me. With that, his mother was up and snatching his daughter from his arms. Annie squealed with delight. Do not have her unwrap your gift, Ansley commanded.

I cannot control where small children's fingers go. Before he could issue another order, she strolled away.

Rising to his feet, he chuckled when he saw Lenny halt her progress. Her husband knew her too well. Ansley suspected the gift would be peered at later tonight after everyone had gone to bed. Lenny would be with her when she first saw it. Ansley had no doubt she would cry, and Lenny would hold her. His mother was a fortunate girl to have in her life a man who loved her so much.

Um- was she trying to get you to reveal what the portrait is? Stephen asked as he and Westcliffe came to stand beside him. indeed.

mother's never been good with secrets, Westcliffe said.

Having them kept from her; Stephen clarified. She is damned good at holding them herself.

She told me she is writing her memoirs, Ansley said.

Good God, Stephen voiced. I am not sure I want to read those.

I do not believe it is there for us. They are for her grandchildren.

No, Westcliffe insisted. My children do not need to know about their grandmother's exploits.

I do not know. Sometimes it is a good thing not to take everything to the grave. He would be forever grateful that Welford had confessed his role in causing the accident.

Although he still was not certain he believed him. But that night no longer haunted him. Although there were times when he did miss Welford terribly. He knew Jannie had similar moments because a faraway look would come into her eyes. Then she would smile at him, and everything would be all right again.

We were discussing Mother and hoping she lives to a ripe old age.

I do not think she would allow any other outcome to her life. She used to terrify me; you know. She was always so strong and bold. Not afraid of anything, very much like you.

"You make me strong," she said, sidling up against him and slipping her arm through his. I like celebrating the holidays here. I enjoy the noise of the place when everyone is underfoot, but I must confess to looking forward to leaving you alone later.

She gave him a saucy look that boded well for what would happen later. Claire informs me that Glean Demure has announced his betrothal, Jannie said.

Jolly good for him. Since acquiring the titles, he had proven himself to be a worthy marquee'

Much to Ansley's surprise.

"I like him," Jannie said with a sigh. You sound disappointed.

Not really... It is just that sometimes I remember, like- how I almost denied him what was rightfully his,' and in so doing, I would have denied our son his rightful titles. What a stubborn wench I was, still stubborn. Playfully she slapped his arm. uncle.

Ansley glanced down, not as far as he once had a nephew.

Well, hopefully, it will be some time before Mother's making that trip to the grave, Stephen said. His brothers strolled away to join their wives.

Glancing around, Ansley spotted Jannie. She was difficult to miss in her vibrant pink. He loved the way she looked in that shade. But then he loved the way she looked in anything. Otherwise nothing at all.

Catching his eye, she smiled at him and walked over. what mischief were you and your brothers up to?

Leaning down, he bussed a quick kiss over her lips. none whatsoever. Why don't I believe you?

6

A force slammed into He is leaving her breathless on the floor in a heap. It was quickly gone replaced by something cold and wet on her ear. There was growling, what in this land growled? Flipping onto her back He came face to snout with a huge white and sliver furry head. 'Alec?' she dared to hope. Her fingers twined around the cat's neck and did not slip through. He was real! Being clean and in new warm clothes that did not shell-like coals on fire or the dirt outside was enough to lift anyone's spirits. Lily and Honor were filled in as He scrubbed herself into a pink and red state.

With a yelp, He was off the floor and kneeling in front of her Guardian both arms wrapped around his thick neck and head buried into his fur. He was

okay. Nothing had happened to him, except that he had gotten bigger. Goddess when had he had time to get this big?

'Oh, Alec.' she sniffed feeling stupid for getting so emotional. It could not be helped; she was so happy that no one had hurt him, and she did not have to skin someone about it.

Low rumbles rolled from his chest onto her cheek. He nudged her and she held on tighter uncaring that the growls and snarls sounded strangely like reprimands. 'I'm sorry.' she told him.

The chastising stopped at once. A huge paw landed on her knee and he pulled away. It was startling to see that they were eye to eye while she was kneeling. The paw on her thigh told her he was not done growing. Sweet Goddess, he was going to be huge. 'I heard you can walk through walls now.' she hiccupped, one hand going to her temples. All this at once was making her headache.

'He was just one of a few people who lost their minds when you disappeared.' Honor glared at the kit He had missed more than breathing. 'He was just the only one who showed how pissed off he was. Your sweet kit,' she used air quotations. 'tried to take off Meridian's head.' He is stomach rolled when she looked down at Alec's innocent expression.

'Well, he was the closest thing.' Lily said for fairness sake. 'we told him not to go near him.' She gave Alec a wary eye. 'The University put a sleeping spell on him.'

He let the shudder run over her body. She was not the biggest fan of spelling now. The thought of Blood's Wrath made her sick. 'But we can tell you about all those fun things once you tell us all about what happens to you.' Forever the barter. He took on a patient look.

Drawing on all her teachings over the years to do it too. She told them about everything from being kidnapped to Armani's kiss and her newfound ability for telling a lie. By the time she got to their escape she was trying not to laugh.

Their mouths were gaping open. She knew how they felt, it was hard to believe that it all happened in a few days and only a few days ago, it felt a lifetime away now. He filled them in, they took it upon themselves to fill her in on ...everything.

'Really?' He had to ask just for the sake of double-checking. They were serious. 'What else happens.' He scratched her all too innocent kit's ear not sure if she wanted to know or not. Of course, they told her, they loved to shock her out of words.

'All of this happen while I was gone?'

'It started the night we found out you were missing.' Lily nodded. 'She went...' she could not find a good enough word.

'He lost his mind. is what she meant.' Honor supplied.

'Yes, he did not show it to anyone but us though. He was chilly in front of his court.' and that was even scarier than his anger. He shivered pulling a comb through the tangles that had grown from days on the road. 'When no one could find, you- as he disappeared.'

'What happens to the Regent?' He asked thinking of something else.

'The one who ruined your coronation?'

'Yes, that one.'

'I- I do not know. He was there when we left. Reyna was looking after him.' watching him He corrected silently. Now that she knew about Reyna it would make life all the easier.

'I don't know how long I have been asleep but- has there been any talk about how the fire started?'

Both women paled. 'No one is talking if they do. They are too scared, and we are not allowed outside the Guild walls after...' Lily looked at her feet. He made a mental note to ask her what she was talking about. 'It had to be mages, that we are sure of.'

He is gut twisted. 'There was strong magic in that fire- there had to be. The few mages we had here tried to put it out, but the fire was too strong.'

'It was magicked to destroy?' He could not believe it. She had to.

It did not take much to put a few things together. It took a lot of mages to put that fire into that kind of state. Even more to make it spread through the city. More than five, more than two dozen. There were only so many places that would house that kind of power and not erupt from the containment of so much magic. One of the places was here, He ruled that out. The Guilds were sacred to the Gods. Another would be the Palace and the University of Mages that rested on palace grounds. Not far in fact from the Palace itself.

He bit her lip staring down at her clean toes wondering if the palace or university had been set ablaze. 'Well come on.' He stood. 'We can't sit in here all day.'

Lily Andersen and Honor watched her warily enough to have He wonder exactly what She had asked them to do. 'He just where do you think you are going?'

'To the University of course.' Alec was the only one to stand to wait for her to tie the scarf around her head before heading out.

She stopped at the door realizing she had no idea where she was going. She had never been in these halls in her life.

Alec looked up at her expectantly, she patted his head. 'Which way?' Lily and Honor still had not moved from their seats. Their heads were not bent together talking. Honor sighed and turned her way. 'We cannot leave the Guild, Mara's orders. You are not supposed too either.'

He opens her mouth, but Lily puts it in. But if you went sneaking off while Honor and I got into a discussion. we did not see a thing.' She smiled.

It was then that He knew that she loved them truly and without condition.

'But if you get caught- you are on your own.' Honor put in.

She still loved them. He waited for their discussion was starting before slipping off out the door and down the hall.

Picking a direction, she walked, she was bound to stumble across a way out eventually.

A caress against her mind's barriers made her jump. It did not feel like anyone she knew; it did not even feel human.

It brushed again, more insistent. He hesitated; Alec growled out an impatient noise.

'What, right?' she asked him. Opening her mind barriers enough to let whoever it slipped inside. She could push her luck a little more.

He felt the link form and solidify the instant it did she hissed tugging on it. It would not break! She pushed; it would not be budged. What the-

'Come on, it is this way-'

He yelped, jumping away from Alec. It was from Alec! 'You're talking to me.' she spoke aloud.

Talking Alec sat down in front of her looking up with a superior and bemused gaze she had never seen on anyone. Besides Her. 'I talk.' he told her. 'You are my kit, mine.' he bares his teeth. 'I protect you.'

He blinked and he put his fangs away. 'I can talk to you.' Alec finished simply.

She would have thought it was funny that he considered her his kit.

'Yes- but.' He fumbled for words.

'Why can't I talk to you?'

He gulped. First, he could walk through things. Now he could talk! What else could he do? She did not know why she expected nothing but to feel his feelings. She had been in his mind a few times, but he had never spoken. He had still a small baby.

'Mate is coming!' He wondered why Alec sounded so anxious and a little resigned. He could talk!

Why couldn't she wrap her mind around that? Aine talked to Sya and Myka with Talith all the time. But she was different because she was not an animal mage.

'What are you doing?' A pair of hands snagged her shoulders. She was caught!

He could not get to upset, when she turned to Her, she told him. 'Alec is talking to me.'

'He?' She took her hand. 'He always talks.'

'But he is talking to me.' didn't he see the difference?

'Do we do something?' she and Her turned to Alec. He was talking to them. 'She keeps saying that.' he tilted his large head. 'She squeaks too.' He told Her what Alec had just said.

'We could give her a soothing spell.'

His growl was reflected and amplified through Alec's throat. 'No more magic.'

'Then she will just have to come to on her own.' She told them not easily phased.

'Is it my fault?' Her large kit ducked his head tucking his tail under.

'No!' She tore away from Her going to kneel in front of her kit. 'It is my fault. I am sorry.' She was.

Alec walked forward butting his large head into her chest, He locked her fingers into his snowy white fur running her fingers along the slivery strips, they were getting darker. 'Forgive me.' she begged to pick up one of his massive paws. How big was he going to get?

'Forgiven.'

'It won't happen again.' He promised to kiss his head, she meant it. 'No matter what.' She would just learn to cope. Alec squirmed away from her an excitement lighting his dark blue eyes. 'We can leave now?'

'Yes, do you know the way out?' He asked before She could get suspicious. He was already looking between them. Assessing them for plans of a conspiracy.

'What is he saying to you? What are you saying to him?' He could not take it any longer.

'-I-'

'Don't you dare try to lie to me Heania Rose.' he growled.

'As if I could. Was using my full name necessary?' She mutters. 'I- we are on our way out.'

'No.' he took her hand and began walking-

'To the University.' He continued calmly allowing herself to be led.

'No, you are not.' he turned down another hall.

'You're leading me in the wrong direction. Alec said the doors are that way.' He pointed.

'Woman!' he pulled her on when she tugged on him. 'Princess, you are not leaving these walls.' He was grateful he was not a truth-teller; he would have conjured chains to reinforce his statement.

'You are right, I'm going out the door.' He told him calmly. 'Your concern is touching all the same.' a strange tic began under his eye. It only grew when she tugged his hand.

'My Gods you are maddening!' He growled. 'you are not going anywhere alone.'

'Even to the privy?' He mused watching the tic get worse.

'Then come with me.' she told him. 'It is really quick to do, the trip to the University I mean.' She would bash his skull in if he followed her to the privy.

He hesitated, He knew he was dying to walk the streets and assess the damage. Check on the people. To see who was at the root of all this. She had him.

'No.' he sighs. 'That wouldn't be wise right now.' He glares at him.

'I can help.' Alec offers to brush against her leg.

'How?' He wondered a deafening roar rolled through the halls radiating on them and carried. She stopped to stare at Alec. Crouched low ready to pounce, his not so baby teeth bared at Her. 'Run.' he told her.

He snatched away and ran.

'HEANIA!'

'Be right back!' she called over her shoulder. 'As soon as a possible, promise.'

Another roar echoed through the hall; it was not Alecs.' 'HE!' Heir's voice sounded in her head.

'I love you!' she called looking over her shoulder. Alec was rounding him up. Her backed up but his eyes stayed on her swiftly fleeing back.

'Alec?'

'I will distract Mate.' he told her

He slowed down, how was she to get out of here? 'Alec?'

'Look for the mouse.'

Mouse? He huffed, he had to know that she was not a cat, she ran from mice and did not chase them.

'There, turn right there!' He stopped turning right into a door, not a hall.

'Alec?'

'Go! I will catch up.' He hesitated before opening the door. The room was are nothing from ceiling to floor, except dust. There was a lot of that.

'Window.' He saw it in the far corner of the room. It was small but she could fit through. 'Hurry!' Alec's grunt sent her running, he must mean that She got past him.

He opens the window, slowly crawling out. She made the mistake and looked down. Her kit had lost his feline sanity!

What other reason would he have for having her scale the side of a small mountain! He closed her eyes; the ground did not come any closer. 'Alec!' She growled.

It was not that bad, she tried to convince herself. One foot, two feet. Oh Goddess, she nearly fell off the side of a mountain.

He started the track down. Praying the entire climb to the bottom. It was not as steep as she had thought, easy trails for a big, pawed Mystery Ice Cat. For human feet, it was a bit more difficult.

He slides the last few inches to the bottom and does not look back. She was out, running into the city without a backward glance. Even when she felt the walls of the Guild rumble into the ground under her feet.

Reaching up, she skimmed her fingers over his unshaven jaw. I did fall in love with you at Blackmon, she said. I should have told you then when I was stepping out of the carriage, but I feared it was not real. I thought coming here would prove me right. But all it did was make me love you more. She glanced down. I fear he will suffer for our indiscretions. He would have been the subject of gossip either way. But people have short memories, and more titillating gossip will shove us from their minds. Soon, no one will remember that we were not married when he was conceived. All they will see is how very much I adore you, and you do not really give a figure what people think. I do not, Besides, he is an immensely powerful family.

Jannie was in the nursery, putting Zakaria back in the crib after a late-night feeding when Ansley returned home from a journey to Rockville. It had been six weeks since they were married, and she thought she would never grow tired of seeing him walk into a room. He strode over to her with purpose in every step.

When he was near enough, he drew her into his arms and kissed her as though his very life depended on it. Six weeks and every kiss were accompanied by urgency. Through all the nights when they could not yet make love, he had kissed her and held her and slept with her.

It was marvelous, so marvelous. He had once told her that a kiss was simply what it was: a kiss. But with him it was everything. It need not start something more, and yet it was powerful enough to stand on its own.

It was only when they came up for air that she was finally able to ask, did it all go well?

It did. There is no whisper of doubt that Zakaria is my rightful heir. Unfortunately, you, however, are now as scandalous as my mother. I have come to feel disgrace.

He arched a brow. there shall be no more of it.

Only in your bedroom. She rose on her toes, nibbled on his wicked mouth; we should begin tonight, are you well enough?

She gave him a saucy smile and nodded. I saw the physician today. I may begin my wifely duties.

May you never consider it a duty. As he lifted her into his arms, his green eyes held a predatory gleam that caused her to grow warm.

She snuggled onto his shoulder as he strode from the room. I thought it was so romantic the first time you carried me to bed; do you not think it romantic now?

I think more so. Promise me that you will never grow tired of me. I promise...

He carried her into his bedchamber, and she flattened her hands against his chest. Ansley, I want you to kiss me.

He grinned. with pleasure.

No. I mean when we are making love. I want you to kiss me and kiss me and kiss me. To make

up for all the times when we did not before; am, Jannie, here you are with rules again. but don't you like this one? Let us just see how it goes. How it went was delightful.

He began by kissing her deeply and thoroughly. Slowly, provocatively. No rush, no hurry. As though they had all night. She supposed they did.

He curled one hand around her neck, holding her in place, while his mouth continued to plunder, and the talented fingers of his other hand began to loosen the pearl buttons on her nightdress. She worked off his jacket and unfastened the buttons of his waistcoat.

He peeled back her nightdress and his burning mouth trailed down her throat, over her shoulder, along the swell of one breast and then the other. Wherever he went, he coated her skin in dew.

I have missed the taste and feel of you, he said, his voice raw with desire. you shall never have to do without again- Straightening, he grinned down on her. what a vixen you have become; an exceptionally talented lover taught me. Like- how fortunate for me.

He returned his mouth to hers. She could not fathom that she had been so silly to deny them before the simple pleasure of a kiss. It increased the intimacy and stoked the fires of passion. He slid the gown off her shoulders completely and it slithered to the floor. He only removed his lips from hers when he needed to. Otherwise, he was there conquering what he had already won.

Then she was standing before him naked and proud. She saw the appreciation in his smoldering gaze. He bracketed her hips.

Your hips are wider; to accommodate the birth of your son.

He went down on one knee and pressed a kiss just below her navel. I do like the changes to your body.

Unfolding his own, he took her into his arms and carried her to the bed. He shed the rest of his clothes and stretched out beside her, once more his mouth blanketing hers.

She scraped her fingers up into his hair, holding him near, kissing him deeply. Her hands explored the familiar contours of his body. He was exactly as he

had been before. Still firm. Still sculpted. Lean and muscled. A great sinewy cat moving over her. She would have him for the rest of her life.

His talented hands roamed over every dip, peak, and valley. His mouth left hers, to journey along her flesh, trailing across her neck, teasing the delicate underside of her chin. Lower, to her shoulders. A nip here. A love bite there. Lower still to her breasts, heavy in his palms. His tongue circled her nipple, his breath coating it in dew.

With her thighs, she squeezed his waist. With her fingers, she rubbed his shoulders. She felt the deep rumble in his chest vibrating against her stomach. There was no purpose in their coming together tonight, no pressure to get her with a child.

Just like his kiss, their lovemaking owned itself. It was a pleasure simply for the sake of pleasure. It was giving and receiving in equal measure. It was what it should have been all along, and she suspected that for him, it was what it had always been: generous gifting of passion.

His mouth whispered a path to her other breast, giving it the same ministrations as it had the other. She lifted her hips, imploring him to hurry, but he would not be swayed from his quest to reexplore all that he had once known.

Ansley, you are driving me to madness.

He chuckled low... good...

Lower he went, kissing her intimately. A swirling of his tongue, a tug on her sensitive flesh. She whimpered, moaned, dug her fingers into his arms. She wanted to fly, but not without him.

Every touch ignited sensation, and she was soon writhing beneath him, crying out for him, urging him nearer.

Rising above her, powerful and decided, he plunged into her and went still. A soft moan from him, a deep sigh from her.

It had been so long, and yet everything was so familiar, as though they were two pieces of a puzzle that had been misplaced and were suddenly found and snapped back together. This was where she belonged, she realized. Beneath him, beside him, near his heart.

I love you, Jannie, he said- like in a raw voice before returning his mouth to hers.

As his body rocked against hers, as the passion built into a fervor, he kissed her hungrily. Each powerful thrust carried her higher. His kisses elevated her even higher than that.

Until there was nothing except the sensations, nothing beyond them. Just them. Moving in a fluid, familiar rhythm, his mouth latched to hers.

When the crescendo came, he captured her screams and she swallowed his groans.

Afterward, she lay snuggled against his side. I like when you kiss me during ...

I like it when I kiss you. I enjoy kissing very much. Even when it is not ...during ...

Laughing, she rubbed his chest. You told me on the terrace that long ago night that a kiss need not be the start of anything, that it owns itself. Lifting herself up, she met and held his gaze. I think the kiss that night was the start of us, Ansley. You woke things in me that had long been asleep. then why forbid me from kissing you?

Because it terrified me. What you made me feel. I thought if you did not kiss me, I would keep my distance from you. But each moment with you only drew me nearer. The feelings I have for you still terrify me. They are so grand, so intense.

Um- that is good because the love I have for you terrifies me as well. I have never loved anyone, Jannie, not like this. There is nothing I will not do for you; will you kiss me again? I shall always kiss you again. And he did.

Epilogue-

Grant wood Manor-

He had looked at her nude body, for sex, with a young woman that was half his age popping her open, and its side in here, and she come-end hard to him, loving him more then she would have ever thought, kissing like made. His gaze warmed her. She had been contenting with what she had because she had never known anything grander. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he leaned in to kiss her. Not brief this time. They had no audience. His mouth moved over hers with a promise of passion, a vow of pleasure.

I arched against him when he moved to my other breast. Two fingers worked inside me, a little tight but nothing I could handle. Not so long as he kept his mouth on me, lavishing my breasts with attention. His thumb rubbed around a sweet spot and my eyes rolled back into my head.

So, close. The strength of what was being built was staggering. Mind-blowing. My body was going to be blown to dust, atoms when this hit. If he stopped, I would cry. Cry, and beg. And kill... I came, groaning, every muscle is drawn taut. It was too much.

... right there- AAAAHHHHA!

7

His heir. He had his heir. Moreover, he had a son. And Jannie. He had Jannie. The bedding was changed. She slipped into a fresh nightdress. Then she sat

in bed and held the baby. She had been so weary that she thought she would at once fall asleep and not wake up for days. But suddenly she had a burst of energy and excitement, and she wondered if she would ever sleep again.

Leaning down, he kissed her brow. thank you. Thank you sincerely.

It would have tormented him to know that his child would not be entitled to his rightful legacy. Blood did matter, and this boy had Ansley's blood pumping through him. One day he would be the King of Ansley. But for now, he was the Marquess of Belle Haven.

Jannie could see it was with a great deal of reluctance that Ansley left so the physician could finish tending to her. The babe was bathed, then so was she.

As the door opened, she glanced over to see her husband prowling toward her. Her husband. Why had she ever resisted the inevitable? She loved him, knew beyond a doubt that he loved her. She could see the depth of his feelings in his eyes.

He drew back and she saw within the green depths of his eyes that even now he still found her desirable.

I suppose we shall have to delay the wedding trip, he said with a wicked smile.

At least a month; decide where you want to go...

Blackmore, she answered without giving him time to finish.

Blackmore, it shall be.

His gaze shifted to their son then. Their son. She could not fathom what it would have cost him to give up the child, to not acknowledge it. His depth of love, even for a friend, knew no bounds. He was quite simply the most remarkable man she had ever known. And he was hers. As was his child. He is so beautiful, she whispered. as beautiful as his mother.

She glanced up at him, wanting to judge his reaction to her next words. I should like to call him Zakaria. Zakaria Augustus Demure. If that is all right with you. I like it very much.

She saw the honesty of his response in his eyes. He would never be dishonest with her.

Zakaria's eyes blinked open, and his little brow furrowed, his mouth puckered. Ansley leaned in. He has your eyes. A deep, deep blue, for now, the color could change. It often does with babies. was it excruciatingly awful? It certainly sounded as though it was.

At the time, but the memory is already fading. And it was very much worth it to hold this little one in my arms. Thank you, Ansley; you're welcome, my duchess.

Only Ansley stood his ground, still holding Jannie's hand. You are stuck with me now.

So, he was there, by Jannie's side, when his son made his entrance into the world, squalling at the top of his lungs, a thick thatch of black hair covering his head.

The tears scalded Ansley's eyes and he blinked them back. It was done. His heart hammered out an unsteady tattoo. He felt the same sort of exhilaration he experienced during a hunt' only it was grander, more humbling. He was swirling through a riot of emotions: joy, worry, the weight of burdens, the lightness of bliss.

I will. He smiled, brushed his hair off her brow. as soon as' now. Before the baby is born.

He glanced at her stomach, at the physician, at the midwife, at his mother, who merely nodded.

Releasing a strangled groan, Jannie squeezed his hand. please. I want him to carry your name. I want him to be yours. Or her. I do not care if it is a girl or a boy. I just want there to be no doubt that it is yours.

That I am yours. That we are yours. right. Mother, get Lenny and send a servant for the clergyman. Hurry. Yes, of course. His mother dashed from the room with all the vigor of a girl a third her age.

With all due respect, Your Grace, you will need a special license, Dr. Alberts said.

I have it.

Jannie smiled at him then. I knew you would. You never leave anything to chance.

Not when it comes to you, Jannie Demure. Kneeling beside the bed, Ansley pressed a kiss to her hand. still, you could not have decided this a bit sooner.

Guilt. It is a bloody awful' Oh, oh, oh! She gripped his hand so tightly that he almost yelled as well.

As her scream once more echoed through the hallways, Ansley gripped the mantel to prevent himself from slamming his fist into it. What if he lost her?

Lost her? he thought. What a fool he was. He never had her.

something must be wrong, he said, gazing at the open door. Why wasn't his mother bringing him the news? Didn't she realize he had sent for her so she would keep him informed?

Women died giving birth. He could not imagine the world without Jannie in it. Even if she no longer lived here after the baby was born, at least she existed elsewhere. That would be enough. Just to know she was somewhere.

Happy. Walking through fields with her child in tow.

Surely a dark-haired child, with her blue eyes.

He heard the patter of running feet and was halfway across the library when Lily dashed through the doorway. She gave a quick curtsy. Your Grace, her ladyship is calling for you.

What is the deuce wrong? He was in the hallway before he had finished asking the question, racing through the manor, up the stairs. He burst through the door into his bedroom. Jannie was still abed, a mound visible beneath the sheets.

She was bathed in sweat, gasping. She held out her hand to him. Ansley, I am so sorry.

Rushing over, he took it, squeezed it, touched her brow. He would willingly die to take this suffering from her.

Jannie...

I was wrong, so terribly, terribly wrong. I hurt you. I know I did.

It does not matter. I will stand by you and the child. Just get this matter, this birth, over with. Be done with it. I will, but first, marry me.

Stunned by her words, the last he had expected, he stared at her- pardon? Marry me.

I am supposed to ask you.

You have already asked ...and I said no. Such a silly thing to do. I fell in love with you at Blackmon. Welford knew. I struggled with guilt. Then when he died, I thought I did not deserve happiness. I did not deserve you.

Jannie, sweetheart, I do not know anyone who deserves happiness more than you. Marry me then.

Leaning up, he brushed his lips over hers. I love you, Jannie Demure, future Duchess of Ansley, with all my heart and soul. will I be enough for you?

You have been enough for me for a good ten months now, and a good part of that time was without all the benefits I shall enjoy as your husband. Fifty years should be no trouble at all. Do I look too awful ...for my wedding?

Her face was damp, her hair plastered to her head. She appeared so incredibly tired. To say she looked awful would-be kind because it was much worse. To me, you are always beautiful.

A commotion at the door drew his attention. His mother, Lenny, and the clergyman entered the room. you would best make this quick, the physician said.

The baby's here.

It was quick. They exchanged vows, and when it came time for a ring, his mother pressed one against his palm.

Your father gave it to me on the day we married, she said, with tears in her eyes. It was always to be yours when you found your duchess. And she no longer had a need for it.

Ansley slipped it onto Jannie's finger. with this ring, I thee wed. I pronounce you man and we' Jannie screamed.

Out, the physician ordered. all the men are to leave this instant!

The clergyman finished the words to the ceremony as he was scrambling for the door, Lenny following quickly on his heels.

She could not, but she did not resist when he pulled her to the water's edge.

Come into the water and I will rub your back and finger your little sweet slit. on, you do not half tempt me.

He drew her into the curve of his body. what would It take to tempt you all the way? She stared up at him. How can you want me? How can I not? You are the mother of my child, the center of my heart.

Before she could comment, as though expecting her refutation, he was guiding her toward the steps. Her bare toes touched the water first, and she nearly groaned with the thought of how wonderful it would be to completely submerge

herself in the warmth. As she went deeper into the water, her nightdress billowed out around her, then sucked in close to her body.

The water was lapping at her breasts when Ansley began to lift her hem. You said I could still be clothed, she chastised him.

I cannot see anything, and you will be more comfortable if you shed weight.

She did not argue. The shadows in the water did prevent him from getting a good look at how cumbersome she had become. Once she was divested of her nightdress, he moved around behind her and began to gently knead her back.

On, that is nice, she said, settling her head into the crook of his shoulder. There is something about the water that's very healing. Slowly, he turned her around and lowered his mouth to hers while his hands continued to roam over her. Everywhere. Everywhere.

-And-

She returned the favor, skimming her fingers over him, wrapping them around him. He groaned low. No, you wicked girl.

How is it that you make me so comfortable with all this? because nothing between us should be forbidden.

Reaching up, she kissed him. She wanted him as she had never wanted anything. She wanted' on. Oh. She pressed a hand to her side while pain swept through her.

He backed away. What is it? I am not sure. I think ...I think I should return to the house. why?

It is time, Ansley. The baby. It is time.

He grabbed her hand. Jannie, marry me. Now. I will send it to the clergyman. Ansley, I cannot.

Not like this.

He studied her for all a heartbeat, and she felt something shift between them. Something unwanted. Regretfully, she realized that she finally carried out what she had so long ago desired: to hurt him beyond imagining. But rather than solace, it yielded only pain.

He helped her out of the pool, but no warmth went with his touch. She found herself grieving once again.

Every time Jannie screamed, Ansley downed a glass of whiskey. It was not fair that he had the means to dull his pain while she did not. What she had felt in the pool was only the beginning. It took another day before her labor began in earnest. He would at once be sent to the physician and his mother. He did not know

why he thought she needed to be there. Lenny now sat with him in the library to wait.

Ansley was not even certain why he remained. He had given everything to Jannie. Everything. And it had not been enough.

So, she was surprised one night when she awoke to find herself alone. She stroked her hand over the indentation where he had been sleeping. The sheet was cool to her touch. He had been gone a while, then.

She rolled out of bed, stretched to one side, then the other. Oh, her back was hurting. She needed Ansley to rub it. Strange, how she knew she had but to ask and he would comply. He gave her so much attention, more than she had had in her entire life. It was as though he lived for moments with her.

She padded out of the room and into the hallway. The door to his bedroom was open, but he was not there. He had grown hungry and was enjoying a late-night repast. But when she went to the kitchen, she found it empty. Then she remembered him saying that he often swam at night.

The grass was cool beneath her feet as she made her way to the building at the far side of the garden. She could barely believe that August was already here. The Season will be ending. She wondered who had become betrothed. It had been so long since she was in Rockville to enjoy the season that she did not even miss it.

It is much better to spend the warmer months here, where the air is so fresh, and she could move about so easily.

When she reached her destination, she hesitated. Would he dislike being disturbed? Or would you be welcome here? Welcome her, no doubt.

Opening the door, she stepped through it. The sultry warmth greeted her, coating her in dew. The light from lanterns battled the shadows, causing them to dance mysteriously between the walls. She stood there, watching his powerful muscles bunching and stretching as he sliced through the water. He was quite simply beautiful.

While she would be content whether this child was a girl or a boy, suddenly she very much wanted to have a child that resembled Ansley. Something in her heart twisted and turned. She had been so afraid to acknowledge her feelings for this man. They filled her with guilt. They had ever since Blackmon.

She had told herself that he called to only the physical in her, but they had been remarkably chaste since coming here, and still, he stirred within her dreams that she had long denied herself. He reached the edge of the pool, turned-

-And-

Stopped, his gaze falling on her. He breathed heavily, the water lapping at his chest. Flicking his hair back, he began plowing through the water, walking toward her. interested in a midnight swim?

She laughed. no, I just woke up and you were gone. I do not know. My back was hurting. I just ...wanted to find you.

God, she was rambling. Whatever was wrong with her? Come. Get in the water. no, I ...I do not think it would be wise in my condition.

He started up the steps. Her eyes widened at the sight of him. on, me. She turned away.

You have seen me without clothes before, he said, and she heard the humor laced in his voice. Yes, but it has been a while. He wore trousers to bed. At least here. With her. He took her hand. Join me in the pool, Jannie. I really do not think' good. I do not want you to think. I just want you to feel.

She laughed. Ansley, you must stop interrupting me. You can even keep your nightdress on. It will weigh me down. then take it off.

Her screams sounded through the residence. Why did he have to feel them in the core of his being? Why couldn't he just ignore them?

Why is it taking so damned long? he asked.

it is the way of it, my friend, Lenny replied. I must confess to being extremist grateful that I.

You do not have to listen to your mother going through this. She is happy with you, Lenny. I am grateful for that.

And that you made an honest girl of hers.

I would have long ago, but ...past loves, like mange, are sometimes hard to get rid of. Despite the circumstances, Ansley smiled.

I would have thought you would be married to Jannie by now, Lenny said. It is not my choice that I am not. He wanted to describe this child as his with a furiousness that astounded him. But she wanted him to walk away, to honor a ridiculous agreement. He wanted the girl and the child' both as his. Openly, publicly. Mourning is damned. Etiquette be'

~*~

Be honest here, Jannie. Your unquestionable loyalty will prevent you from ever taking a lover; then why would you even suggest'; because there would be no guilt, and how, pray do tell, did you deduce that utter nonsense?

Because you do not fancy him at all, so-o it would not be as though you were truly betraying me; you have gone daft. She headed for the door's Jannie? Please, do not go. Please, hear me out.

Stopping, she glanced over her shoulder to see his arm extended, his hand reaching for her in the shadows of the night. She could win any argument with him by simply leaving the room. It was not fair to him, and so they never argued. But this? This was preposterous.

Please, Jannie.

His voice was rough with his need for her to still be. Unfair. Unfair of him to compel her to stay, knowing guilt would eat at her if she walked away when he could not.

She was trembling with anger and disgust at his suggestion regarding Ansley, yet still, she cautiously made her way back to Welford. She clambered onto the bed, took his hand, and held it in her lap, her legs tucked beneath her. She refused to look at him, and instead studied the silhouette of their joined hands.

The fact that you think so little of him is what makes my plan so brilliant, he said quietly. it is not as though you will be truly betraying me. Your heart will still be mine.

Ansley has a reputation for being a marvelous lover', he began.

I am aware of that. He is all the women talk of, so-o, he can make it pleasant for you. He squeezed her hand. You deserve that at least.

All of Rockville will know it is not your child. That you have been cuckolded.

He will carry Demure blood. As I told Ansley, it will be close enough.

Her mouth tingled. She thought she was going to be ill. Have you already discussed this madness with him? I had to know he was agreeable.

Of course, he would be agreeable. It is a skirt to lift.

His low chuckle took her by surprise. He was not so in favor of it as I had expected. He did not think you would welcome him. I will not.

Jannie, you have been a devoted wife. Why should you not have this?

She was grateful for the dark, that he could not see the blush warming her cheeks or the tears filling her eyes.

He can give you what I cannot, he said softly. You are a young girl who has had to lock all her dreams in a musty old trunk, because of your husband's poor judgment.

In a friend. A friend to whom you would now give me. It is revolting.

He did not force the drink down my throat. I went willingly into the curricule, encouraged the horses to go faster'

She brought his hand to her lips, pressed a kiss to the backs of his fingers, knowing he would feel the dampness coating her cheeks, the tears gathering at the corners of her mouth. Am, Jannie.

He wrapped his hand around the nape of her neck and drew her down until her face was buried in the nook of his shoulder.

Do not ask me, she rasped.

I will not force you. Neither will he but I know that I will understand if you change your mind. You deserve a child. You deserve a man who will not only put your pleasure above his but will ensure that your enjoyment far exceeds his.

Not Ansley. Never Ansley. Sinners would have a need for overcoats in hell before she would willingly give herself to the man, she despised more than any other.

8

Jannie slipped out of her husband's bed near dawn, leaving him in the company of his snores. She had not slept well. Guilt had reared its ugly head, guilt that she had lost his heir. Not that she knew for certain that the baby had been a boy. But in her heart, she could not help but think that he had been. Losing the child had been like losing a piece of her soul. And when the full extent of Welford's injuries had been made clear, all their dreams went astray.

'Oh, Goddess.' He murmured under her breath sending up prayer after prayer. The streets were full of people. The air was strangled with shouting, with crying. Prayers and pleas were being sent up to the Gods. Curses to the Gods. Despair and Panic ran deep in the air. The air shoaled of despair panic and loss.

'Put your veil on.' She scooted his horse closer to her own, helping her to hide all her black hair and most of her face. She ripped his shirt putting it to his

nose. He did the same, the smoke was thick with the stench of burning hair and flesh. It made her stomach roll and try to rebel.

The sound of crumbling timber ripped over the roar of people startling His's horse. She barely noticed She take hold of her reigns. She did not notice anything beyond the house before her crumbling in on itself. floor after floor until it hit the ground with a cracking thump. More people screamed around them.

'She...' He licked her lips; they were too dry. She felt as if she were baking 'What do we do? We cannot do anything.'

She said nothing, just handed her back her reigns. His mouth opens as a shrill scream ripped through the air.

'HELP!' a dark figure ran from the smoke out of a burning house. 'Klever! Klever!' The words, a name, were said in a frantic voice.

'His!' She called after her. He was off her horse and running toward the small figure. She was taller than him but could not be so much older. It did not matter, His took one look at the woman's desperate brown eyes and burned clothes and knew she had to help.

He came closer, slowly. The woman already shoaled of smoke and fear, like everything else. 'Can I help?'

'My son!'

His heart sank. Do not let the boy still be in that house, do not let him be in these mad streets. There would be no telling how many people were trampled in this chaos.

'I thought- he ran out. He is still-' her eyes widen and looked up at the same moment two hands rested on His's shoulders. Then they were gone, and a tall figure was running into the blazes that were reducing the house before them into less than a kindle. She opened her mouth for She to bring his ass back to her side, but she knew he would not listen even if he could have heard her.

With her heart hammering in her throat for She's safety she turned to the frantic woman. 'What is your name?' He grabbed the woman's hand pulling her towards the horses and out of the street's main chaos.

'Flora.' She would not take her eyes off the house.

Neither could Him but she had to ask, had to know. 'How did this happen?' It was more asked to herself, but Flora spoke.

'The Unrest caused it.' Flora ducked her head away, her eyes darting frantically towards the house and back to His. He is muscled bunched, she was dead weary, but she would stop this woman before she got herself killed.

'We aren't to speak of it.' Her voice got lower. 'It's treason but- there are sad things working here.'

'Such as?' He could hardly breathe. 'What sad things? Tell me, please?'

'The King has abandoned the throne and betrayed the Gods; our Lady has left ran off with a lover' Her body trembled. 'There is talk that the Gods...'

He did not like the sound of this anymore. She had to know more. 'The Gods are a part of this?'

'They are angry with Mystery; they will forsake us until we accept the new-'

'New!' new what? King? Surely not. 'Who?'

'I know not.' Flora would not meet her eye. Of course, she knew.

He looked around at all the screaming people. Not a single eye was dry, the smoke was working. Her own eyes were blurring with the stuff. That moment of wiping her eyes cost her. Flora moved and He was a moment behind her. A tightly coiled spring, tackling the racing mother to the ground. They rolled in the dirt. The mother let out a heart-breaking moan. His heart was breaking for the woman but when she spoke her voice was one of steel.

'Don't be stupid.' His hissed at the whimpering woman. 'Run for that house again and I will bind you to my horse.'

'But...' the words died on Flora's lips. He was not joking. She was worried too. He had not come out yet, why hadn't she come back?

He had not been sleeping well on the road he refused to do more than take a quick nap and that was only when He bullied him. He had been pushing it to reach Median, but still. He should have been out by now.

The house on the other side of the one She rushed into caved. Floor by floor it stacked in on the next. Flora cried out but did not move.

He could not take it. There had to be a way to stop all this. Stop Median from burning, this was her home now. Desperate His sought deep for her magic. She swore when she needed it, she would be able to use it. That it would return to her eventually. She needed it. There was not a promise she would not make the Gods not to stop all of this.

Inside she recoiled. Do not promise that. Never promise something to a God, they might just take you up on your word. If you were unfortunate, they would bind you to it. Gods are fickle and mortals are seen as expendable.

Still, He dug into herself, searching for a long-lost old friend. It was there, deep down, but it ran through her. When she found it, they embraced in the furthest reaches of her mind, a place she would have never gone to unless she was truly desperate. If she had not truly been looking for it, her magic would have stayed out of her reach for a while longer. Now that she had it back, washing over her, caressing her heart with the truth. It was so faint, but it could be enough. He dared to hope.

She had no magic over elements. She was not a fool to think she could put this out with her own magic, she was not that strong. A whole troop of mages could put out the blazes of a city. Not one woman with truth-teller magic.

Around her and in her head the chaos reign. He pushed it away, she had to be calm. Clear in the head. She was not a great Mage like Mican, her brother of the law, but she was a Truth Teller.

He bit her lip. It had worked miracles before, it could work again. His open her mouth, she was about to find out.

'A Great Fire is blazing in Median, my city.' her nose tickled with the truth. Her home was on fire. Blowing out a breath His continued. 'It shall die away ...now.'

A great gust of wind brought Him to her knees on top of Flora who was still sobbing. He shielded her against the roaring winds wishing the screaming around her was just a bad dream. It had not worked, the wind was going to blow the fire even further, out of the city limits and now He did not even have her magic to protect her.

She had not felt it at first, not until she was lying on the ground over Flora gasping for clean breath. She felt the ripping tearing through her gut and up into her chest with sharp hot pricks that had her eyes tearing up. It hurt! Dear Goddess, it hurt!

She had not hurt this badly since the last time she had overextended her magic in Krad.

Thumps echoed around her, pounding into her ears. Plop after plop, words rang through the air braking through His's haze.

'Goddess blesses!' Someone shouted. 'Miracle!' screamed another. He looked up, the sky was black and gray. Ashen, there was not a tinge of orange glow insight. Not a sight of pink or a spot of red.

There was no crackling to be heard in the dead of the silence taking over the city. A ghost had descended His thought before the roars rang in the air and into her ears.

'Momma!' He flew, onto the ground. 'Momma.' Flora was running toward a slight figure quickly advancing.

'Clever!' Mother and son clashed in an embrace. The child was young, His guess when she saw his feet leave the ground. No more than five winters. He was being rocked back and forth in his mother's arms both were crying. Hysterical yapping told Him there was puppy involved.

'Princess?' she had never been more pleased to hear that voice. 'What are you doing on the ground?'

Enjoying the skill of soot and dirt. He worked her mouth to say but nothing came out. She was too tired. 'I-' she did not have to finish, there were too many voices to be heard through.

'We are being blessed!' cried a man. 'Gods be praised.' they all yelled. He realized that the plopping she had heard was really the sound of bodies falling to their knees.

'Another attack-'

'What happens?' it took Him a second to realize that she was being spoken to.

'I- what?' she asked as he hauled her to her feet. He seemed bemused by the whole thing. Only He knew that really this had scared him shitless.

'His, was this you're doing?'

His snorted, why would she set Median ablaze?

'Did you put the fire out?' the world spun leaving Him to wish that he had left her on the ground where nothing had been moving.

'I-' She was not sure. He shook her head feeling stupid and muggy headed.

'That must be yes.' She hugged her tighter righting her veil. People around them were moving quickly now. He had a feeling that the temples would be busy tonight. All of them.

She must have been thinking along the same lines. He turned to the mother and son. 'You and yours need to head for the Mother Temple, take all that you need and value.' Looting would be heavy tonight. 'Go.' Flora was already nodding clutching her son who was strangling the puppy.

'Thank-' She waved her off. The three of them ran towards the direction of the temples without a backward glance.

'Now.' He adjusted Him again. 'Let us go.'

'Not to the palace.' His words were slurred. She had not drunk since the night of her binding, not heavily at least. She should not sound like she was drunk. 'We can't-'

'Yes-' he persisted. 'We ca-'

'No!' He clutched his sleeve. The thought of stepping foot back in those walls tonight made her skin crawl. Something was happening, they needed to find out exactly what before they barged back into the palace.

She looked down at her fist clutching his sleeve. Couldn't he see how worried she was? Terrified was more like it. 'All right.' he finally gave in. 'Okay, we'll go to the Guild.'

He let out a sigh and slump. She did not remember falling but she knew that She was there to catch her.

But for him to believe that she would welcome into her bed the man responsible- it was beyond the pale. Reviling. Made her sick at heart. She was grateful that she had far too many other things to occupy her mind today as she prepared for the arrival of her guests. The sooner she got started working on what needed to be done, the sooner she could shove these unsettling thoughts from her mind.

She rang her house cleaner, Lily. Within the hour, Jannie was dressed in a simple lilac dress so she could move about quickly. At noon, she would change into something more proper for receiving her guests. Once a yearly event, they had not hosted a hunt since the accident. She had feared it would serve as both a distraction from what might have been and a reminder of what had been. But Welford insisted it was long past time that they began to socialize once more. Finally embracing the notion, she had lofty expectations for uncharacteristic normalcy for a few days.

An expectation splattered before her when she strode into the breakfast dining room and saw Ansley already seated at the table. She had assumed he would sleep in, not be up to the sun.

Ansley at once set aside his teacup and rose to his feet- lady Welford.

...Your Grace. I hope you are well; your hopes do not concern me, your elegance.

She thought she noticed a tautening in his jaw. She was not usually a termagant, but for him, she was more than willing to make an exception.

Allow me to express my appreciation for the lovely accommodation, he said laconically.

It seemed they would spar with words this morning.

Already she was weary of it.

Welford would be upset with her if he knew she had given his exalted guest the smallest bedroom in the farthest corner of the manor. As a King, he should have been given a suite of rooms. She suddenly, against her will, felt petty. We have so many guests arriving' no need to explain. I enjoy overlooking the stables.

She wanted the subject changed before she offered him a more accommodating room. I had not expected you to be about so early. I thought I might be of service.

Had she been eating she would have choked. here? Now? Your arrogant cad! To think that I would accept anything at all from you, but especially-'

My help with the hounds? He interrupted. Yes, of course. Forgive me. I am sure your huntsman is quite up to the task of seeing that all is ready tomorrow for the hunt.

She went light-headed and chilled, aware of all the blood draining from her face. He had been offering to help her prepare for her guests. That was the service to which he alluded. Not bedding her, not getting her with the child. Welford had put these silly notions into her head, and she seemed unable to rid herself of them.

Yes, he is. Quiet. She hated that her voice sounded unsteady, that she was unnerved by what she had interpreted him to be saying. She swept over to the sideboard, striving to stop the trembling in her hands as she selected ham, eggs, and a muffin for her plate.

Drat, it! He was waiting to aid her with her chair when she turned around. At least he had the grace to put her at the end of the table farthest from

where he was seated. He had not taken the head of the table, but rather, a chair along the side.

I want nothing from you, she whispered as she took the chair he offered.

He leaned in, filling her nostrils with his rich, tangy scent of bergamot and clove. then nothing you shall have, he said, his voice low, sensually belying the words he had spoken, indicating instead that she would have it all. Everything.

~*~

The man was indeed an expert at seduction, but she would not be seduced. She and Ansley sat without speaking for several interminable minutes, the only sound the scraping of silver over china.

Finally, she dared to peer up at him, only to find his gaze homed in on her as he slowly chewed. He was as handsome as the devil, too beautiful, really. He had one imperfection, and it was presently not visible to her. A scar on his jaw. The wound had still been bleeding when he came to tell her there had been an accident and Welford was horribly injured. Ansley had reeked of excesses and indulgences ...and the coppery scent of blood. Her husband's blood had stained his torn and rumpled clothing.

Ansley had looked scared that night. And young. It was easy to forget that he was only a little older than her. He had always seemed so mature, in control. Many thought he was the oldest of the three brothers, but in fact, he was the

youngest. The night she first met him, she was struck by his stylishness and confidence. She knew of his reputation, of course.

Women swooned at his feet. Of late there seemed to be an inordinate abundance of unmarried women, as women refrained from accepting offers of marriage on the off chance that Ansley would honor one of them by asking for her hand. With his thick black hair and startling green eyes, he was a god among mere mortals. Jannie despised him with every breath of her being.

His Grace took the marquees fishing. He tested his fishing line before testing other waters. You mentioned your ridiculous notion to Jannie.

He saw no need to further clarify. Only one ridiculous notion had been spouted since his arrival. In truth, it was the only ridiculous notion he could recall that Welford had ever had. When only silence greeted his words, Ansley gazed back at him once again.

Welford gave a hapless shrug that unbalanced him. He started to list to one side, released his hold on his pole to straighten himself.

Ansley looked back at the water, giving his friend the opportunity to grapple with his gracelessness in private. His first inclination was to rush over to assist him, but he knew Welford would resent the interference, the implication that he could not attend to his own needs even if, in many areas, he could not. Like himself, his friend was a proud man, too proud for his own good. He did not want

to consider what it had cost Welford to ask him to get his wife with child. He was not certain he would be willing to pay the price, no matter how much he loved the girl.

You had the right to it," Welford eventually said, sounding winded, as though he had run a great distance. She was none too happy with me. Afraid that leaves it up to you, old chum.

Ansley swung around. pardon?

You will need to charm her, wear down her resistance to the idea.

You have gone mad. His voice held a biting edge. Welford might find all this amusing; Ansley did not. He remembered the chill that entered the breakfast room with her. But more, he remembered the tantalizing scent of her as he aided her with her chair. Jasmine. Exotic. Enticing. Her flawless skin beguiled him.

He had been so tempted to slide a finger along the column of her throat. He had wanted to kiss away the firm set of her lips. The last thing he wanted was for Welford to grant him permission to seduce his wife. He suspected Welford had no clue regarding how much Ansley would enjoy doing so. Welford might view it all as an uncomplicated transaction, but Ansley viewed it as a quick journey directly into hell.

No matter how short a term he spent with any girl, he shared not only the physical but the emotional as well. Warmth, caring, concern, enjoyment. The love

he held in reserve. He was not certain he could withhold that elusive emotion from Jannie. She struck him as a girl who would demand all' even if she came to him expecting naught but his seed. Time with her would not be simple. Complications abounded. He was certain of it.

You are on the verge of having a hundred guests, he said now, and you wish me to flirt with your wife?

Not openly. I am not daft. But surely you can arrange moments alone with her. You have done it with other women.

Your wife is no other woman. He was surprised by the roughness in his voice. He turned his attention back to the stream. Leaves were drifting to the ground in the slight breeze. Those killed by the advance of winter. He wondered if Jannie's frigid mien toward him would kill him. Quite possibly.

Pity both your brothers are married, Welford said. I doubt either of them would lack the courage'

Courage has nothing to do with it! Ansley snapped. Although it did. He feared he could easily

lose his heart. But he could not confess that to Welford. It is simply a bad idea on so many levels, and I believe you and I have already reached our quota for bad ideas.

I did have a jolly enjoyable time of it that night, Ansley. Until the end, of course. How are my jewels?

His pet name for the girls he loved. Glancing back, Ansley met his friend's gaze. well taken care of.

I have thought about telling Jannie.'

Good God, I cannot remember the last time I felt such ...freedom, Welford announced.

Standing along the bank of the stream, Ansley glanced over at Welford. With his back against the tree where he sat, and a pole held loosely between his hands, he was at peace. Since the accident, whenever Ansley visited his friend, they had stayed in Welford's library, drinking, conversing, lamenting their poor choices.

Like Ansley, Welford was an outdoors person at heart. Ansley had decided that their visit would go differently this time. It helped immensely that Jannie had been occupied preparing for the arrival of guests and attending to last-minute details. Ansley knew she would not approve of his plans. From what he would say, she was too protective of Welford, coddled him.

Suddenly, Ansley wondered if part of Welford's desire to give his wife a child rested with his need to divert much of her attention away from him, to give her something else to worry over.

A child would certainly carry out that. Although most children of the nobility were tended to by nannies and child caretakers, Ansley could not see Jannie relinquishing the reins for any great length of time. She would be involved with the child. It was her nature to protect, to nurture, to ease the way. She would no doubt keep the little pup far away from him' whether he was the father. He wondered who was second on Welford's diabolical list.

He remembered her bright red cheeks during breakfast. He was accustomed to her giving him the cold shoulder, always just shy of a cut direct. But this morning she had been skittish, more uncomfortable with him than usual. For a moment, when she saw him sitting at the table, it looked as though she intended to march from the room. His accommodations were deplorable. That much he had anticipated. But her gaze flicking over him and not settling with a glare was unexpected.

9

Setting down her napkin, she pushed back her chair and rose. We are quite different, you and me. We do not suit at all. I would trade places with him in an instant to spare him all he suffers now' even though I did not cause the suffering that is visited upon him.

He wiped his mouth with his napkin, elegance in his motions, tempered with masculinity. His large hands held power. His sensual mouth as well.

She could imagine him skillfully using both to elicit pleasure. He seemed to hesitate before saying, Wilford appears ... frailer since I last saw him.

He is limited to two activities. Sitting and lying. Neither of which is continually active. His muscles atrophy. I fear soon nothing will be left of him. She bit the inside of her cheek. She had not meant to reveal the last, to give him even a hint of her vulnerability.

It terrified her to think of a life without Welford. Even as he was, she decided, was better than not having him at all. She shored up her resolve, decided to hurt this man who had destroyed so much. tell me, Your Grace, does the guilt ever hammer at you enough that you would wish to trade places with him? I would give my soul that he was not crippled. But I must confess to being far too selfish to wish to trade places with him.

Ansley flinched, the lash of her words hitting home. As she turned and swept from the room, she wondered why she found no satisfaction in the triumph.

Four hours later, Jannie cursed herself for her stubbornness, for not accepting Ansley's offer to help. She had forgotten how much was involved in preparing for the hunt and the arrival of guests. Sixty invitations have been sent out. Fifty-eight had been accepted.

Including spouses, unmarried sons, and daughters, more than a hundred people would soon descend upon her quiet country home. It had been so long, so

exceptionally long since they had entertained to this size. An occasional guest for dinner, a relation or two, but not a flock of the curious. In equal measure, she dreaded and welcomed the coming days.

Hence the reason Welford had declared that it was past time for a hunt' even though he would not be able to take part in what was once his fondest sport. I shall enjoy listening to the baying of the hounds once again, he had said.

She made her way up the stairs to her husband's bedchamber, hoping he had been roused already. It took so long for Randall to prepare him for the day. Welford had lost far too much control over his bodily functions. Four times a year Randall took him to the spa at Harrogate to heal the waters.

Although Jannie had always wanted to go with him, Welford asked her not to' fearful she would be embarrassed by his limitations. It hurt her that he would think so poorly of her. But she brushed her tender feelings aside because his challenges were so much more difficult to face.

It was only recently' when his physician introduced him to a contraption known as a catheter' that Welford had begun to regain his confidence and felt any comfort in being around others. He was now spared public embarrassment over what he could no longer control. Such a proud man he was.

She admired his optimistic outlook; he never seemed to pity himself. She hoped the entertainments and country party she had arranged would please him and

bring him boundless joy' and that none of their guests would stare at him with questioning eyes. How bad is it really, Welford?

Her heart would break for him if all did not go well.

Randall shot to his feet and bowed. My girl- forgive me. His lordship gave me leave to read one of his books. I thought this one might suffice, and sat for only a moment'

I do not give a figure where you sit and read. Where is his lordship?

He looked decidedly uncomfortable, as though he knew she would not be pleased with his answer. She was not.

To her surprise, he was not in his bedchamber. The library, then. Ready and eager to greet those who would soon be arriving. To her consternation, however, the library was empty of his presence as well. Although Randall was sitting in a chair reading.

Where is his lordship? Jannie demanded.

10

She grabbed his hair, yanked, and pulled him closer as he had told her to do. He thrust one finger inside her, crooking it and hitting her in the spot that turned her moans into one long, high-pitched orgasm. She shuddered against him, her legs quaking, and when he finally slowed to look up at her, he saw her hair was

a wild tumble, and her face was glowing. At first, he made no motion. His sex was quivering, and he was tormented with desire... Marianne grew desperate.

She pushed his hand away, took his sex into her mouth again, and with her two hands, she encircled his sexual parts, caressed him, and absorbed him until he came. He leaned over with gratitude, tenderness, and murmured, 'You are the first woman, the first woman, the first girl...' When she saw that he was dissolved with pleasure, she stopped, divining that perhaps if she deprived him now, he might make a gesture towards fulfillment. He drove his tongue inside her, setting off another shattering moan that was music to his ears.

She was quite an instrument to play, so finely tuned, and if he touched her right, she made the most glorious sounds, raw, intense, delicious noises of pleasure as he plundered her with his tongue. Then his hands came to life. He went as if to rub his wrists, then he reached for the blindfold, his fingers dancing right in front of it without touching it, and then he reached out for me.

I jumped... some- He caught me by the arms, wrapping his fingers all the way around them and bringing me forward. And then he realized I was naked, and he felt my sides and my breasts, giving a little startled noise. Besides, before I could stop him, he had pulled me to him, forcing me against his chest.

His adulthood was thumping against my sex, and he kissed me in that shocking way, and I realized he had lifted me off my feet. 'You are mine,' he grunts out, pumping into me, the length and level of his arousal brutal. 'Mine,' he swears,

as he releases my mouth and turns me around, pushing me forward as he yanks my legs back, one hand hard on my back, the other gripping my ass.

He does not slow the movement, giving me full, hard thrusts, my breasts bouncing from the top of my dress, the mirror above the sink giving me a full view of my sweet young girl, in worn dress, light hair mussed, mouth open, intensity over his face. His reflection pulls at my hair, tilting my head back, and I find his eyes on mine in the mirror.

11

I fear she is not at home, Your Grace, the butler said.

Ansley stilled. not at home to me, you mean. I will see her if I must find her myself.

The butler cleared his throat. she left for Herndon

Hall this afternoon.

With a sound curse, Ansley headed out the door.

The carriage had come to a halt sometime earlier. Jannie did not know the exact time. She knew only that darkness had fallen, rain poured down, and a footman stood ready with an umbrella should she decide to disembark. She sent her house cleaner in as soon as they arrived. Yet despite the dampness and chill seeping into her bones, she could not bring herself to leave the confines of the carriage.

The door clicked open. She did not know why she was not surprised to see Ansley climb inside and take the bench opposite her.

What the bloody hell are you doing, Jannie? How did you know I was here?

I made a call to your residence. Fairly killed my horse to catch up to you. Did you think I would let you run off without coming after you?

I was not running off. I' She had been running away. She looked out the window toward the residence. I cannot bring myself to go in. It was not as difficult in Rockville because we had not been there in so long, not since the accident. But here, for more than three years, it was everything. And everything was a lie. Jannie'

I had to leave Rockville, Ansley. I feel as though I am suffocating there. You, your mother, the woman, Cousin Green' I have no peace. I cannot think, I cannot breathe. I know so many people mean well. She released a wry laugh. some do not. I thought if I came here, I could at least breathe. But I can 't leaves the carriage. I do not know what I was thinking.

It was not my intent to suffocate you, Jannie. But I promised Welford that I would ...care for you. Come to Grant Wood Manor, Jannie. You will be away from the madness that is Rockville. You can heal in spirit. Give birth to your child. Return here when you are ready.

She felt the tears sting her eyes. He was not going to pressure her to marry him. It was both a relief and a disappointment. yes. I think I should like that very much.

It was late when they arrived at Grant Wood Manor the following night. Here the only black crepe to be seen was what she wore. Here the clocks ticked. She felt a lifting of her spirits that astounded her. She had not realized how much she needed to get away from the oppressiveness of both the Rockville residence and Herndon Hall.

Ansley had been the perfect man on the journey here. He had regaled her with tales of his youth, the history of his ancestors. They had spoken of nothing intimate. Yet there was a sense of intimacy. It was simply his way' with his silken voice and his gaze never straying from her. She told herself it was because he was always in the mode of seducer. A habit formed during years of frequenting bedchambers. His reputation surpassed that of his brothers. Did he honestly believe he could give it all up for her? Did she?

She wanted to ask Ansley to lead her up the stairs, but then the reality of the situation came crashing around her as he opened the door to the bedchamber beside his. She was certain it had never occurred to him that she would sleep anywhere except within easy reach. I should sleep at the end of the hall, she said. He shrugged. select whichever room you want.

She did not want the room she had had before. She did not want the room where Welford had slept. To move to another wing would be ludicrous. Strolling down the hallway, she considered every other room. None was as big as the one he offered her. None was as inviting. She would be here until she gave birth.

Her back had begun to ache on the journey, and she had been quite miserable. She reached the end of the hallway, pivoted, and returned to the door he had first opened for her. I suppose this one shall do. But you are not to use the door between the bedrooms. I would not dream of it. that is a lie. I suspect you were dreaming of it on the way here. a small lie. Is it my fault that I find you irresistible?

He was such a charmer, always knew the right thing to say. She wished she could trust his words. Ansley does not woo me with false flattery. one day, Jannie, I shall convince you that I have never given you false words.

She opened her mouth to remind him' omission is not false words. It is still a falsehood. He shook his head.

Would you care for a late-night repast before bed? he asked.

Yes, thank you.

While the servants hauled up her trunks and put away her belongings, she joined Ansley in the smaller dining room at a table with only four chairs. She

sat across from him while the simple fare was laid out before them. She popped a square of cheese into her mouth and followed it with a grape.

I suspect many mothers will be disappointed that you are not in Rockville for the Season, she said.

They would be more disappointed if I were there and not paying attention to their daughters. you might be surprised. Someone might catch your fancy.

He lifted his wineglass. someone already has. As you well know. I am in mourning, she reminded him exasperatingly.

She watched his jaw clench just before he gulped down more wine. I am aware of that. Just do not expect me to be too jolly about it.

She wanted to change the subject. You and your brothers grew up here, didn't you? Yes. Mother preferred Glenwood Manor to Lyons Place.

Of late, however, we have been gathering for Christmas at Lyons Place. Claire has made it a true home for Westcliffe. Your residence already feels like a home. not when I am here alone. It is too blasted quiet.

The prospect of silence was what had driven her away from Rockville and Herndon Hall. She did not want to be alone with her thoughts.

He had been devoted to her during their month at Blackmon, but then she had given him everything.

They had lived in a bubble, but now the bubble had burst. She had no doubt that in time he would grow weary of her.

Then she would face the challenges of raising her child alone.

Following dinner, Ansley tried to convince her to join him in the library for a bit of reading, but she retired to her room. He went to the library, but rather than grab a book, he grabbed the bottle of whiskey and headed for the garden.

Trekking beyond the house, beyond the lighted path, he reached an area blanketed in darkness except for the glow of stars and moon. He sat on the grass, opened the whiskey, and took a long draught, relishing the burning and the penetrating warmth.

Jannie was correct, blast her. He had gone into this situation knowing he could never recognize this child. It did not stop him from wanting to nor did it prevent him from wanting her, but his desires were ill-timed. She needed to heal. This child would be born. Welford would be recorded as its father. Ansley would do all that he could to protect it.

Stretching out on his back on the cool ground, he stared at the stars. Their distance made them more appealing. Jannie said she was suffocating. He brought her here to breathe. By God, he would give her room to breathe.

Sitting by the window in her bedchamber, Jannie did not want to admit that she had enjoyed sharing dinner with Ansley. Even when they did not speak, it was a comfort to have him near. But was that enough?

She nearly leaped out of her skin when he came bursting into the room. Come along. I have something marvelous to show you, he announced. But I am in my bedclothes. It does not matter. There is no one to see.

He ducked into a bedchamber across the hallway and emerged with an arm filled with blankets. His excitement was contagious.

What is it, Ansley? You must see it to believe it.

He led her through the manor. Once outside, he said, grab my arm. Do not let go.

She curled her fingers around his arm and allowed him to lead her through the garden, away from the house, the lights. We should have the torches lit. Nope, they will interfere.

He came to a stop. She watched as his silhouette, limned by moonlight, arranged the blankets on the ground. Then he took her hand, drew her down until she was lying on the blanket, gazing at the stars. She saw one sweeping across the sky, followed quickly by another, then another.

She released a small laugh. What is happening?

I do not know, but I have seen it before. It is as though the stars are racing across the sky. Do you think we are only allowed one wish? I think you can have as many as you want.

She studied the sky. So many things to wish for. That she would have met Ansley before Welford. But what guarantee did she have that he would be any more faithful? The fact that she had not had a month with Ansley caused her to doubt her affection for Welford. But then she would not have a child.

Is it wrong that I am glad to be here? she asked, not certain why the words burst forth. Is it wrong that I am glad you are here? It was so much easier talking to the stars.

I was not such a good wife. She had thought saying the words would ease the burden of guilt. It had been with her ever since she left Blackmon. Her greatest fear was that somehow Welford had known how she had felt that somehow the knowledge led to his decline.

You were an exceptional wife. You were a much better friend to him than I. Not such a good friend. I fell in love with his wife.

He rose onto his elbow and cradled her face. I fell in love with you while we were at Blackmon, he admitted.

With a sad smile, she shook her head. It was lovely while we were there, but it was only fantasy.

We had no responsibilities. It was not real. for me, it was extremist real.

Because it mostly involves the bedchamber, and that is where you spend a great deal of your life.

Not so much as you might think. I have been with a girl since you. She hardly knew what to say.

I was going to take a lover, he confessed. but I could never work up any sort of enthusiasm for the search. Then I decided to take a wife, but no girl appealed to me. I finally realized why. None of them were you. I love you, Jannie.

This time, the words spoken with such intensity, resonated through her heart and soul.

I have from the moment I met you, he continued. Not deeply of course, at first. But there was a spark, a twisting of my heart, and I regretted that I had not met you before Welford. I thought if I had ...that you would have become mine. Ansley, please do not do this.

I know the timing could not be worse. You are far along with child' my child. A child I want to recognize as mine. Marry me, Jannie.

He had asked before, but she had not taken it seriously. Now his declarations and insistence terrified her. it would be scandalous. We have been scandalous before. It did not turn out so poorly. He splayed his fingers across her

belly. I want to call this child mine. That is what I wish whenever I see a star fall. That you and this child will be mine, and all of Rockville will know it. She skimmed her fingers up through his thick hair. you ask so much of me, she said.

He pressed a kiss to her temple, to her forehead, to her other temple. Just consider the possibility. I truly consider it. That is all I ask.

He settled his mouth firmly over hers, taking possession as though he owned it. She let him. She welcomed him. It was more than she remembered. Perhaps because this time it was not forbidden to take place in the shadows of a terrace or a goodbye that nearly tore her heart from her chest.

It was a tentative beginning, a starting over. Something they had truly never had. Always before the scepter of scandal and the whisper of betrayal had loomed over them like black thunderclouds rolling over the lake on a winter evening.

She knew that tonight it would go no further than this: an exploring of heated mouths, soft groans, and low moans. She was not ready for more than this. Her emotions were too raw. But she took what he offered, allowed it to fill a well that had gone dry. She had longed for so much more than what Welford could give her. And what he withheld from her had nothing to do with his paralyzed body. She knew that now.

He had always given the better part of himself to Madeline Black, while she received the crumbs. She deserved more. She deserved everything.

From the first Ansley had given it to her, had never held back, had always taken her needs into consideration, and placed them above her own. But it was not the real world. It was a secluded place where they had frolicked.

Drawing back, Ansley sipped at the corner of her mouth, then pressed his forehead against hers. Jannie, let me sleep with you tonight. To hold you. Nothing more. yes, she whispered.

Lifting his head, he gazed down on her. wishing upon stars seems to work. I want to get to know the real King of Ansley.

His smile flashed in the moonlight. you already do, sweetheart.

Over his shoulder, she saw a star shoot through the sky and made a wish. Forgive me, Welford.

12

There were few guards, He walked past the first gate without trouble. It did not mean anything, the Median palace had two gates that lead in and out. As she went, He made sure to pay extra attention to the path she took from the time she left the Guild walls.

It had been worse than she remembered. There had to have been a lot of magic to build a fire that big. It did not feel right even now, it had eaten everything too thoroughly, too quickly. As though it was driven. In places the only thing she had seen to tell her there had been homes there were the char marks lining the house borders.

So many homes-they had been burned to the ground. How many people had been in them?

Every occasionally, she had seen someone, the never dawdle in fact their eyes never left the ground. They were like a ghost, no more than a faint shadow upon sight and gone in the bat of an eye. He had nodded to a ghost that had not to disappear and watched as his near about died.

The closer she got to the last gate the fainter the traces of smoke and fog stay. Everything seemed untouched, from the palace wall to the palace itself. He walked up to the gates preparing to enter.

'Halt!' He slowed down but did not stop. 'In the King's name halt!' She did not, not until she was across the threshold of the last gate and insight of the palace walls and a sword blocked any further movement. She turned to the man, guard, knight, who stopped her.

'What are you doing?' She asked him. 'I am not trespassing.'

'I am not to let you pass today, no one is allowed inside.'

Her brows furrowed. He was dressed in a full guard uniform. He bet he was newly knighted. he looked young. A little younger than her. The mystery had few knights, unlike Ask who had armies of them. He stepped away letting him see her attire waiting for him to recognize what she posed as.

'Dancer-'

'He.' she winced, it was time to stop being so earnest and honest. 'No need for titles'

He ducked his head, eyes roaming over the grounds before grabbing her arm.

'Oy!' He yelled yanking to get free. 'Unhand me don't you know who I am?'

He gave her a dark look still pulling her for the shadows of the gate.

'No, I do not know who you are and that is not important. It is what you are that concerns me.'

'You have something against dancers?'

'No, I do not. It is a bad omen for harm to come to a Dancer. That is why I am warning you to leave.'

He stared; she was so sure he was going to try something after pulling her into the shadows. Not warn her. 'I-'

'It is a curse to harm one of God's own.' he went on 'I will warn you.'

He leaned in closer. 'Warn me of what?'

'To leave.' he was solemn.

'Why would I do that?' he could have been teasing but his expression told her that he was not.

'Median is my home.'

'Your home would do you harm, it is better to leave.' he spat out the words in distaste. He felt his arms shake; she could practically smell his own barely had feared. Her mouth went dry.

'What is happening here?' she whispered not wanting to be seen or heard any longer. Not if what he said was true. 'In- in the streets, they were ablaze. The Guild sent me here for answers.'

His grip tightens. 'All you need know is that you are no longer safe here, none of you are.'

'Why?'

'I do not know.' he lied, she felt it.

'Is it because of something going on within the palace?' What else could it be?

He would no longer meet her eye and He knew she had hit the center target. 'I know not.' he lied again.

'The University did nothing to stop that fire.' He murmured to him knowing that if he felt like it, he could very well charge her for treason for her words. 'Did they have something to do with it?'

'Again, I know not.' he lied again.

'You are hurting me.' His hold slackens but did not release.

'I hope nothing in the palace was destroyed or came to harm...' her shoulders rolled. 'I need to speak with the king now.'

'No.' she yelped as his grip tighten. 'You don't want to speak with him little Dancer.' she understood. Danger.

'The Queen is fine as well.'

'I cannot permit it.'

'Why not?'

'Because neither are in those walls.'

'Then who is in charge?'

'A good question I wish I knew the answer too. You do not want to speak to any of them.'

Interesting. He nodded. 'All right.' She pulled away and he let her go.

'You will leave here now. Do not come back until things get better.' He nodded and began to walk away, out of the shadows into the light. She walked through the gates, second to the first. She did not stop there, once she was out of the gates, she broke into a run not stopping until the palace became little more than a faint overcasting shadow and her chest burned with fire.

He was ready to head back to safety, back to the Guild and to- her. She wanted nothing more than to feel She is warm embrace around her, telling her everything was going to be okay or better yet wake her up from this nightmare, but it would not happen. That and she had one more stop to make.

The temple was really a district, a section of the city dedicated to the Gods. His hands never set foot here and never planned on it. The closer she got the better at picking them out she became. The temples stood tall, proud, and immovable as the deep earth where a stone was buried.

A tall temple stood behind the rest, taller and grander than the six around it. That was the Mother temple. Where the Goddess was worshipped. Beside that pyramid stood one just as grand though shorter and more forlorn. He knew it was the temple of Gareth God of the Dead, he always stood at her right. The position a lover took the Mother and Gareth have been lovers since the beginning of time. They had five children whose temples surrounded their parents.

Dorn, he was one for prosperity and favored Door and Dorian born. I said that he gave birth to the Dorian people. Dorn was rarely worshipped outside of Dor. He was even disliked for his favoritism. His sisters Zeera and Tee lit were preferred to their brothers and another sister. Zeera and Tee lit were twins one of fire, Zeera. The other was the Goddess of water, Tee lit. They were so different yet- they were never able to stay without each other of long. The twins sat to the right at the temple at the feet of their father. Barb oden was the hunter, I gave his temple a quick once over. He was his mother's son and dislike by her lover.

He quickly passed the last temple. The last child of the mother and Dark God was the one no one spoke about. Out of them all, she was the most feared and revered. Ucceith was the messenger of the Dark God, she and her maidens and hags went around collecting the souls of the dead taking them to one of the seven resting realms.

He headed for the Goddess's temple. It was everything that she had expected and yet worse than she had feared. Bodies sat, lay, they filled the streets lining them. Most seem all right, soot and dirt-covered but unharmed. The air smelled of smoke and human bodies. Some were crying, quietly, most were praying. Priestess and Priest moved around where they could be giving what they could. He turned away toward the other temple. The temple of the Dark God was not where she had planned to go but it felt necessary.

The stone was cold under her feet when she entered. It all slammed into her to be choked down. The shell of burnt flesh and hair. Death tried to suffocate her as she moved inward. He flagged down the first priestess she met. An older middle-age woman carrying linen and a haggard worried look. She had not slept for a while. He is fingers curled around her arm.

'What your turn.' she was too tired to put a bite in her voice.

He studied her a moment longer before opening her mouth. 'I am not here for help. I am here to help. What can I do?'

'He.' Rue's voice called her, but she could not look up from the stitch she had to finish before the numbing cream wore off. They had wheedled out of her that she knew more than a little about healing and set her to work treating and binding wounds. 'He.'

'I am almost done.' He finished the last stitch before tying it up. 'now what-'

Her breath caught in her chest as they stalked toward her. He got to her feet stumbling into Rue.

'He!' Honor came forward wrapping an arm around her friend. Alec prowled through the small row of bodies, a low growl emanating from his throat. He did not butt her and purr, he just growled, at her!

'Bad kit.' he told her. 'bad!'

'Thank you, sister.' Honor nodded to Rue hauling He toward the exit. 'We will take care of her.' If Rue was going to protest one look from Alec stopped her as he brought up the rear leading the two women out into the night air.

He sways all the way home; she had not even realized how late it had gotten. Or how much her feet ache. A lot.

Her fingers felt swollen and numb from all the numbing cream she had used for doing stitches.

there had been a lot of gashes, twice that many burns. All of them moaned and talked to her while she worked. Those who slept were talked to by worried family.

~*~

'He!'

The children had been worse. They cried and had nightmares, some of them did not have family around them. They were by far the worse.

'He?' there had been nothing to judge them by but their faces and that did not speak of much more than pain.

A roll of thunder echo around them. He blinked. When had they made it back to her room?

'While you were in La-de -la land.' Honor answered her unspoken question.

'Did you enjoy yourself?' Lily came to stand by her mate while tapping a dainty foot. He stepped away from the dangerous glint in her eye.

'-I-'

'I hope so because we sure had a blast. Do you have any idea how much fun it is to reassure two whining men over and over that you are all right and fraught their attempts to come after you!' He turned to Alec. He leaned on her knee low growls still rising from him. She felt it then, a more unnerving brooding gaze burning through the side of her face. 'Her?' she turned to the room entrance where she knew he would be. Unsurprised to find him there, her mouth pressed into a line shriveling up under his glare.

She had seen him angry before but not murderous, not murderously intent on her alone. 'Her? I-' there was only one word to say that would make this right. It was the hardest word she had ever known. 'I'm sorry for worrying you.' She held out her hand to Alec as a peace offering. 'Forgive me?'

'I forgive you.' Alec butted her leg. 'Never again. Good kits do not do that.' She would have told him she would try not to if he had asked a question. He let it go. Turning to the last hostile stare in the room. He took a deep breath.

Then there was one. She leaned against the wall, arms crossed and relaxed. His whole frame was relaxed and lazy. His face betrays everything, He knew just how angry he was. 'I'm sorry.' she offered to extend a hand to him. He did not look at it. 'I just meant to do a little stop and then I-' she saw all the children. Rue had told her what was needed, and she got swept up in her work. She had done what she could but there was still so much more.

Honestly, how was she supposed to know the sun had sunken down into the ground. 'You shouldn't have worried.' He continued.

'He don't-'

'I'm fine.' she announced to them all. Plopping back against the bedpost. Lily winced, Honor just knocked her forehead into her palm, repeatedly. What was wrong with them?

'No.' The voice to answer was chilling and cool. He shuddered. 'You're not.' He stared as She transformed into a moving, living thing instead of a glowering statue. 'You would do it repeatedly until we found you.'

He clicked her tongue not bothering to disagree. He was right. 'So, here is what is going to happen, Princess, for your misdoings-'

'What!' He jumped up indignant. 'I didn't do anything wrong!' She sways on her feet but stayed vertical.

'No, but you did something very stupid.' He went on coming nearer.

'Bad Kit.' Alec brushed her knee. 'you are naughty for scaring us.' He glared down at the little traitor. When Lily and Honor made no move to interfere on her behalf, He backed away from the boys she adored. The back of her knees bumped into the bed. She glared at the two of them.

'You wouldn't.' She told them flatly crossing her arms. Putting more conviction into her tone. 'You. Would. Not. Dare.' To her horror, she came to find out that not only would they, but they also did.

When they returned to the house, he followed her into her bedroom. She clambered onto the bed, then watched, mesmerized, as he removed his jacket and waistcoat. He did not even bother to look in the direction that he tossed them, but they landed with unerring accuracy on the chair anyway, and she wondered how often he had followed those same motions. His movements were fluid, confident. He sauntered over to the bed, sat on the edge, and placed her bare feet on his lap. Slowly, he kneaded the ball of one foot and then the other.

You are so very skilled at this, she said.

He rubbed his hands over the arch of both feet. I am skilled at many things. His gaze holding hers, he moved his fingers in ever-widening circles up to her ankles. His eyes darkened into a challenge. but there is one thing I have never done.

His hands moved higher, carrying her nightdress with it, reminding her of their first night together. She clamped her knees together. Ansley, we cannot.

I am aware of that, but what I want now ...I want to see your belly. I want to see where the child grows up. Ansley'

How could she refuse such a heartfelt plea? Licking her lips, she nodded.

Ever so slowly, as though he were unwrapping a precious gift, he moved her nightdress up over her knees, past her hips, up to her chest. He placed his hands on either side of her waist and studied her increasing girth.

So, beautiful, he whispered. He lifted his gaze to hers, and she could see the wonder in the green. You are so beautiful, Jannie.

Lowering his head, he placed a kiss on the spot where their child' for this moment in time it was theirs' grew. Straightening, he drew her nightdress back down to her ankles.

I am glad you are here. I am glad the child will be born here.

He joined her that night, beneath the sheets. His body is warm and familiar. Comforting. He did not tempt them with passionate kisses or sensual caresses, but he held her near, stroked her back, her arm, her hip. They lay on their sides, facing each other, talking quietly. About his brothers and their families.

About his mother and Lenny. Her parents were deceased, and she found mercy in that for they would not know the questionable things she had done.

When she fell asleep, his arms were around her, and she felt safe, protected, and, for the first time since Blackmon, she was not lonely.

Jannie awoke alone to thunder booming and rain slashing against the windows.

After ringing for Lily, she climbed out of bed and walked to the window. It was a gray, gray day.

No walks in the garden, but she could stroll through the manor. She was unfamiliar with a good bit of it. She had only been here for the duchess's wedding. Then she had done no exploring. Surely, he would not mind if she did so today. She would ask him over breakfast.

But after she was dressed and went downstairs to the breakfast dining room, she discovered that he was not there.

He is already eaten, my woman, the butler told her. He is in his studies now, working. Would you like me to escort you there?

No, that is quite all right. I shall just have something to eat and then I believe I shall stroll through the residence if there are no objections.

None- he informed me that you must leave to treat the house as though it were your own. If there is anything you want to see, you have but to ask.

Nodding, she turned away and went to the sideboard where an abundance of food waited. She had been unable to eat in the early months and lost her appetite after Welford passed, but now she was famished. She ate so much that she thought she might burst. When she was finished, she strolled through the residence, imagining herself as lover here.

At the top of the landing, in one of the wings, was a portrait gallery. The windows stretched the length of the room. She sat in a chair and watched the storm rolling over the land. It was beautiful, yet powerful. It rivaled all the emotions roiling through her.

All the feelings for Ansley that she had squashed were rising to the fore' so quickly, so forcefully. She loved being in his presence. She loved the way he made her feel treasured. He would do the same for the child. She could not imagine this child growing up and not walking within his shadow.

Stephen proposed to Mercy there.

With a start, she smiled and glanced back over her shoulder. He looked so relaxed, so at home. To spend all her days and nights with him ...if only this child would wait a year to be born.

Leaning down, he pressed a kiss to her forehead before sitting in the chair beside hers. Did you eat this morning?

Like someone with no manners. Two plates' worth. You have a wonderful cook. I will let her know. I could do that. See your menus. You are not here to tend to my needs.

I shall go stark raving mad if I have nothing to do because then all I have are my thoughts for distraction. I do not like the direction they go. Do they want to take you away from here?

Slowly she shook her head. no, they consider staying.

The pleasure reflected in his eyes warmed her, and she gave her attention back to the rain. you have no fox hunting here. no. What do you do when you entertain? shooting. Have lots of birds. are you skilled with a rifle, then?

I am somewhat of an expert shooter, yes. Considered proving for Cousin Green. I do not really blame him, you know. He has so much to gain.

But he could have gone about it differently. I should have spoken to you instead of gossiping.

Is that what you would have done?

I suspect I would have done nothing' or at the very least, I would have given you time to mourn.

Inconsiderate lout.

She smiled at his disgust with Cousin Green. you take his accusations personally.

He is threatening to make my child's life miserable. I will not stand for it, Jannie. If you do not marry me, I shall bring the full weight of my title to bear against him. even if he is, right? It is a dilemma.

He did not remind her that it could all go away if she married him. Cousin Green might not care about making her unhappy. Ansley obviously did. She wanted to erase the furrow between his brows. She nodded toward the outdoors. What is that building over there? It was brick and stone. Long. A short distance from the residence.

My pool. I should show it to you when we go on a walk.

By afternoon, the rain had stopped, and they strolled through the garden. Then he took her to the pool.

It was long and narrow, the water still, except for the steam rising from the surface. Steps led down into it.

So, you just swim across it? She asked.

Yes- back and forth. It is not very deep. Even if you do not swim, you could go into it. It would be like taking a bath in a huge tub. He laughed. not exactly. I should like to watch you swim sometime.

I suspect I will be doing a good bit of it at night.

She stared at him. really? Why ever would you swim at night?

He cupped her face. You really do not understand how irresistible you are, do you?

Tilting her head back, he lowered his mouth to hers. The kiss was gentle. Exploring, communicating. Before him, she had never realized that kisses could take a variety of shapes and forms.

Softly, provocatively, he teased her senses. She found herself leaning into him, wrapping her arms around his waist. He undid no buttons, lifted no hems, and yet she felt as though he were making love to her.

He could convey so much with his lips, with his fingers lightly touching her cheeks, his thumbs slowly circling at the corners of her mouth. She wanted to fall into him, against him. She wanted him to lie her down and kiss all of her.

All thoughts of anything beyond the two of them disappeared when he gave her such undivided attention. Would he still be kissing her like this when they

were old? Was it only the newness or the lure of the forbidden that spurred him on now?

Ansley's stomach clenched. It was too soon for Jannie to have given birth. Dear God in heaven, do not let her have lost the child.

Opening the message, he stared at the words that had no meaning.

It is with the heaviest of hearts that I inform you that Welford is dying. He asks that you bring his jewels.

The coach traveled down the road, the horses galloping as fast as the coachman could drive them.

Without truly being aware of his surroundings, Ansley stared out the window as the trees and sloping land flashed by. The jewels were safe. He had them in hand. But delivering them seemed like such a terribly bad idea.

Welford is dying.

He had hosted a fox hunt a few short weeks ago, and all was well. How could he be dying? It did not signify.

Ansley caught sight of the large boulder that marked the beginning of Welford's property. He remembered how Jannie had ordered him to stop when she saw it. He wanted to call up for the driver to stop now. He did not want to continue to Herndon Hall; he did not want to see his friend diminished by death. Why had he

stopped his visits? Fish needed to be caught, foxes chased, and horses are ridden. Conversations over whiskey needed to be had.

He had thought himself unselfish to leave them in peace, but now he wanted every moment back. Death had come with no warning.

Only three years separated them. What would he do if he had only three years to live? What if it were something they had done together that resulted in this decline? What if he could have prevented it? Had he failed his cousin once again?

Reckrimination swirled through him as the coach turned onto the road leading through the estate. The trees were heavy with leaves awaiting the first breath of summer. Gorgeous. He saw a fox peer out through the brush and then dash away. It would still be here for this year's hunt, but Welford would not. It was impossible to contemplate. Herndon Hall without Welford... The coach slowed 'stay here' and he leaped out before it stopped. Although he dashed up the steps, he was not moving at all. He barged through the door.

The butler came to my attention. Yours Grace, Is he in his bedroom? yes, Your Grace. the marchioness? She is not left by his side.

He raced up the stairs, taking them two at a time, his heart pounding to an erratic rhythm. At least he was not too late.

He hesitated for a moment outside the bedchamber to gather himself, regain a calm facade. Then he shoved the door open and strode in.

Although the windows were open, the room shilled of sickness and death. The sunlight was doing a poor job of battling the shadows. His gaze fell on the frail figure lying in the bed, then it shifted to the girl sitting in a chair beside it. Ansley.

His name was only a whisper upon her lips, hers a shout within his heart. She rose and walked around the bed. His gaze at once dropped to her belly. Was it slightly more rounded than it had been before? Impossible to tell. She touched it self-consciously. Tears brimmed in her eyes. She was a girl who should never have cause to weep. thank you so much for coming, she said. How could you think I would not? As ill-advised as it was, he stepped forward and cradled her face between his hands. He could see the toll Welford's illness had taken on her, yet still, she was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. Her courage, her strength, were all too visible. She was battered but not defeated. How could this have happened? He asked.

Looking momentarily lost, she shook her head. I do not know. His body is poisoned. someone is trying to kill him. No, no. His physician says that Welford's body has turned on him. It has stopped functioning properly. He is inflicted with a deadly fever. There is no hope.

He slid his easily her arms and took her hands into his. I have brought my physician, Dr. Roberts. He is excellent. We will see what he has to say.

More tears welled in her eyes. I am so glad you are here. I did not know whether to send you' of course, you should have.

He would have it no other way. I do not know why he was so insistent that you bring him his jewels. I do not know what he expects to do with them. he has not told you about them, then?

No. I do not even know what kind they are. Rubies. Emeralds. Diamonds. What does it matter?

It mattered.

Ansley? Welford croaked. is that you, old man?

Ansley gave Jannie's hands a final squeeze of reassurance before he strode over to the bed. Jannie followed, her footfalls soft until she was standing at its foot, one hand wrapped around a post as though she needed the support to still be upright. How difficult this had to be for her. Welford looked bloody awful. His skin had an unnatural pallor to it. His eyes held no life at all. always in want of attention, aren't you, Welford?

His cousin released a weak laugh. I was always the most interesting of us. still are. Did you bring them? Did you bring my jewels? They are here. I left them on the coach. I need to see them.

He glanced quickly to the side, to Jannie, before turning his attention back to Welford. You have not told Jannie about them.

No- you do ...that. You owe me ...that. His breathing rattled; each breath labored. It is your fault, you know. Your fault I am here. Wilford, no, Jannie pleaded. do not say these things.

It is all right, Jannie, Ansley said. let him have his say. He deserved the verbal lashing. So, he stoically held his friend and cousin's gaze.

See? He knows it is true. Just as I have been telling you. It is his fault. Welford struggled to push himself up, and Ansley stepped forward to help him, to settle him back against the pillows. if only you had given me the bloody reins, I would not have been forced to take them from you.

Interval: 2 Sins of the Fallen Angel

Part: 1

Death is not something, that I thought about at the age of ten. I would have never thought it would be like this... I- we are not saying anything now and let you judge for yourself at what you think. You know I would never really say- all that much to anyone- real about this- like how I was going to pass on in this life. Yet I had never really given myself any belief to do such a thing, for passing one like this was not something to do that for. Ages- months- day- weeks- years I have

reasoned with this thought. Would you have guessed that it would have ended like this- I would not have...? I would not even make-believe it like this.

This all began with me sitting in school, day in and day out looking over all the others around me- yet none was like- he was- not the Joy yet the joy- you get- get that? I sit with a spoon in my mouth- staring at this- boy I do not understand- yet cannot help being feel is right to me. I got up to dump my tray, I felt like I was holding my breath in- and did not know why- when I happened to see his eyes catching a glimpse of mine. Awe- that loving feeling is all that makes me feel right in this gay- of a school lunchroom.

Making my way as I walk not trying to trip over all the chair legs being all stumble's I start to see the end of the long room come to me, into the obscure eyes of the stalker- the boy, that never lets me out of his eyes sight, and he looked pleasantly back at me. I know that you would say it was not an effective way to end- like- a young life- I see you think, but with me and who I am, I okay with it... I think. I feel lost in his eyes like being in a dream of someone, and something no me... nevertheless, I love. It is all good here- flashing light starts to play out as I investigate his gaze and I haze in my day lost in love land; I do not know if I am standing of flouting in his hart- it was that warm... not could at all- like the rest of the faces.

I hope- beyond hope, this would amount to be of something- like lasting- and forever even in the forbiddingness this it is. I strongly hated this freaking town.

The one where I knew that I had to go back too... I would have never thought of going back to Bradford, for anything- not a friend- not my dad- only the chances to be in the arm of him- the boy with the eyes that take me away. Yet if I had not done this, I would not be looking into my demise at this very moment- like you must be feeling too.

Funny I keep have flashes about this- like hot moments of him laying with me- yet that was upcoming- but felt as they already have taken place. Content- yes, but- oh so frightened of not knowing what a boy like him was going to do with my- body, mind, and soul... I was all his- investigated his grasp like- I would not let myself feel shamelessness, for this all, what he did, and did not do... I feel in a way it was all my choice. Dream what they give- and what life hands you crossed path to me- so dreamy- beyond and on top of it all you feel- lost in depth- of any of your outlooks or viewpoints, it is not sensible to feel sadden when it all concludes where you are ripped back it the real world of BS. I want to dream all day in these boys' eyes- where there are no lies- in the hope of young love- to take place. The stalker grinned with the perfect white cast at me- and the smooth face, and exactly right body that would mold oh so fine with mine- on my bed. In a friendly- I wanted all that too- it was a dream I had- like finding him out from the inside out- the way he strolled forward, was killing me, yet I was thrusting for it like he was of me.

Long ass day- mom was at the wheel, singing songs for the 90's- rocking out a way to hard. I was not happy yet, not told- some would say emotionless- off to the train station- yes, I had the window down my head out like a sick puppy. My dark hair flapping in the wind. My eyes sheng in the sunlight, my lips too in pink.

My face- light- and glassing with a shin too- yet with light pink cheeks and freckles. Not could not too warm it was in my mom's hometown of I do not give a shit- you would know where it is anyway.

So why say it... the heavens above a faultless, cloudless light blue on the top and darker on the bottom. I was wearing my favorite shirt- tank top, lacey and pink- that is my favorite color if you did not know- what I am young girl here... I like pink like girls like buying undies, which are see-through and stingy. My dad is going to have a shit over knowing that one- yet most do at my old school.

I was wearing it as a farewell gesture- like an F- U to the town that I feel suck old man balls! All the kids picked on me for being such a ratty thing. My handbag spotted like a Dalmatian dog. 3 tops, 4 pairs of jeans, 2 skirts- and 5 pairs of undies. A toothbrush- and bush, and lip gloss also... all that is mine or so mom said. I was from a sucky town and went to sucky school where they all just sucked- end of story... a small shit dump- where it smelt like cow shit. Now I am off to a place where it is always covered with low fog. Where are dumps gushes of prowling down rain all the freaking time!

ALL THE TIME!

Crappie... It showers on this petty town more than any other place in the United States of America, or so that is how I feel about it. Some would say it depressed- yet how I see it with my eyes that need the change. The place where my mom had me oh like 15 & ½ year a go- do ask about the random sex they had to make this dumb ass girl! Gross! They did not last yet me I did back and forth to the one that loves to heat each other.

Love is good- no?

No one keeps it though... yet that was before looking into those eyes... It was in this town, that I had been bound to spend a summer break there every summer.

I am going for 11- and this was where I had my friends... if you can call them that most- older- some younger it is more than what I have the land where they all suck! And suck in not an effective way! I remember back- my dad- a goof- someone that you fall for fast... or so my mom said.

Gross!

It was here in this town, that I now émigré myself- an act, that I took with boundless dismay. I loathed my old school- the teachers, and all of it. I loved it here in the spring days- with the colors- yet I was never here in the school, I was worried about that one fact there.

I loved the sun and the blistering heat, and all the boys in there swimming shorts, and rock-hard chests, just like the girls with their killer bodies, that I do not have- not yet anyway. I think girls can be cute... I loved the dynamic, extensive village. The train rides long- and foggy- or highs and lows- and tall viaducts- that are 3,000 feet (about the height of the Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in the world) in the air. The cars are old- 1800's even if it is 2016.

Where the glass is smudged with fingerprints- and the coffee is raunchy, like the mood of the girl getting the tickets. The cars on the outside golden- orange- whoop- is what I hear as I go to bed in the sleeper, hearing the steamer- work hard on the hills. A new day starts a new life for me- in the eyes of the death path.

'Lily,' at least a thousand times my mom said to me- the times before I had gotten the train. 'You don't have to do this...' she was crying for the only reason was my school life sucked hard, and I was not taking any more harassment and names. Some have said I look more like my dad than my mom- yet really, I do not know.

I see my nose- with my dad- and my lips my mom. Eyes are my dad's... like cerulean... my dad's gray- so I have that look to in low light. The boy with the eyes- I felt a tremor of anxiety as I stared at her wide, innocent, un-deflowered, childlike, and vary naïve eyes.

Me-Like- how can I leave my affectionate, uneven, crazy mother to find myself, as she did back before I was made? She had my stepdad now- that just did

not get me, so the bills would get paid now that I was not the big mouth in the way of the sex all the time, gross! I do not want to know all that- looking at her kissing on the lips! Then she asks where my mouth has been- yes you got it!

There would be food in the refrigerator, gas in her car, and my room for their office now, and my sister has the floor as she did in the school, on the other hand... 'I want to go- to get away from it all,' I lied... about being okay... I have... I permanently have been a bad liar, yet not at this one... but I have been proverbial this lie so-o many times, and so freaking frequently times lately, that it sounds almost convincing to her- and dad 2 does not even give a shit. I still love your dad, I just not in love with him- I never was- tell him hello to me!

- Okay!

'I will... mommy' I said sighing as I go on the step of the train car... Mom- 'A big trip for a little 10-year-old- yet she is fine I no- she is strong... and been through a- lot! I will not be seeing you for a while you know that... I went for the next step looking back.' 'You can come home whenever you want, you know that... (I was thought only if numb nuts dump you)- I will come right back as soon as you need me, whenever you feel you need me there.' Nevertheless, I could see the disadvantage in her eyes behind the promise. 'Don't worry about me at all.'

I commended. 'It will be fine without you. I love you, Mommy.' (And- she was off...) She embraced me tightly for a minute, besides then I got on the train, and she was gone. Dad had honestly not noticed a thing about me coming- He

gave the impressions delighted, that I was coming to live with him for the first time with all the time now- any degree of immovability. He would already get me itemized for high school, then was going to help me get a car- like- a nice new car I thought. Awkward- everything is weird with a boy that is your dad- like in a room with him next to me or peeping in on me, like- doing things... it is so-o going to freak me out- like how do I talk girl stuff with DAD?

Or a dad like his has been to me- the high five dad- you get the type. But then again it was sure to be with him anyway. Neither one of us... was what anyone would call talkative. Like- when they saw us together in the past days, and I did not know what was said regardless, or what to say... I knew he was more than a little confused about having a girl to look over- he could hardly take care of himself- by my pronouncement- like my mother before me, I had not made a secret of my revulsion for Bradford. I did not see it as a sign of something bad- just mandatory. I would by this time say my goodbyes to the sun also- so I can get even whiter.

I made it- of the steps of the last car- number 19- Daddy was waiting for me with the hard hat steel on. This I was expecting, too.

A Barns and Tucker head engineer- of the continuous meaner breathing coal dust to make a life for himself- and my stepsister Emely.

Continuous mining utilizes a Continuous Miner Machine with a large rotating steel drum, equipped with tungsten carbide teeth that scrape coal from the

seam. Most others on having water running down their backs into their ass cracks. My most important impulse behindhand ordering a car, and notwithstanding the shortage of my resources, was that I was saying no to be driven around town in a company periwinkle blue Prius. Nothing say's straight gay like that!

Dad gave me an uncomfortable, armed around the boob's- or lack of them- hug- from the side, when I stumbled into him. 'It's good to see you, hun,' he said, smiling as he routinely caught me like I was five and no boys were looking- and stabilized me. He said- you have not changed much a- lot. How is your mom? 'Mom's fine... she asked about you- so like call- we have the technology... It is good to see you, too, Dad- but... you need to be less hug-ie.'

I was not allowed to call him by his name to his face... yet dad was hard for me too. I had only a few bags... Most of my LA. Clothes were too holey and skimpy for PA- some would say slut in these parts, not for LA. My mom and I had pooled our incomes to extra my wintertime apparel, still, it was revealing. It all fit easily into the suitcase with wheels... that I feel a concern along. 'I instigate a good car for you, really cheap,' he proclaimed when we were short of money.

2

I now have my permit- yet I can sweet-talk him into let me go to school alone- it is not that far... What kind of car? - I said the dumb question hoping for something that would not want me to roll up into a little ball and hope to dye... I was doubtful of dad's pick of cars- and cool rides, it is a good little heavy car- a

good car for you to start with' as opposed to just 'good car.' 'Well, it's an automobile sweaty, a ford.'

Fords suck dad! So- but not this one... hun... he said snickering like to me as I roll my eyes wonder what this shit looks like- it must be cute or it going to kill me. yet on like must I at least now have a car- cool for that thanks daddy- I am grateful for this... money is tight and works hard to find- and kids today bratty ass wipes that do not get it- yet I do- I happy... I just want wonderful things that are all. My friend got a 1990 blue Cadillac Deville for form her dad on her birthday- I like it old but powerful... old class- it worlds... you can party in the back of that thing! She would know she has- with her boy.

I am sure that is where she lost her virginity.

Something I need to do- to not suck at life so hard. 'Where did you find it?' I built it for you over the last winter... 'Do you remember me saying about this project I had- 'No.' I said wondering what?

'What year is it?'

I asked more than worried... I could see from his change of expression with mine like- he knew I would heat this car. That was the question he was hoping I would not ask. To see if I would approve of him- and his work, and his dad skills... 'Well, I have done a- lot of work on the engine a small block 8- it's only a

few years old order the granddad, really.' WHAT? I said- ha yah here it is hun...

'He hot road-ed a 1932 ford sedan for me.'

Really- wow- I did not know they had care back then... all cram and tan inside- all new inside and out they do not make um like this anymore- you can say that again I said no sure what to make of the whole thing. I opened my eyes to that- to me it was a go-kart... that you feel like you are going to die in. 3 ON THE FLOOR- what does that mean... ha, you learn- to drive a real car. Do you like the striping on it? I hoped he did not think so little of me as to believe I would give up that easily on something new. 'When did he buy it? I did not find it in a hayfield or in a junkyard.'

'The man 83 years ago get this thing new, and it was bought?' Funny- dad- so yes, it is a new car... yes for everting is re-done- he had his whole red nick family in this thing- 'gross!' I did not eat- I did not sleep- all I did was work on this thing after work for you to have when you got home. 'Dad, I do not know anything about cars.

I would not be able to fix it if anything went wrong, and I could not afford a mechanic...' Nothing is going to back on this thing- and if so let me know... and it has taken care of... ', Lily, the thing runs great. They do not build them like that anymore.' You are calling me Lily now? Is that okay- sure I like it... The thing is, I thought to myself... some- it had potentials - as a nickname, at the very least. 'How cheap is cheap?'

30,000, that was the part I could not compromise on. You did not do that... yes for you- remember I did love you all your life- I hope this makes up for the time lost. Yep... I think I may love this car... I hope... He peeked sideways at me with a hopeful expression I should have given- yet he got a thumbs up, and I walked out of the garage. Wow- wow- wow- and huh? I am going to get murdered for driving this... 'You did not need to do that, Dad. I was going to buy myself a car.' It has done... here are the keys... see if you like it... (Test drive) it does not even have a radio- do not need it with how to load this thing is- lesion to that baby perrrrrr! 'I do not mind... really- sighing... I spoke. You do not know what you have... do you? What...? NO. Something guys assassinate for! Remember that... I want you to be pleased here you know, that right?'

Um... He was looking ahead at the road when he said this... in I was tugging on the wheel- Dad was not comfortable with expressing his emotions aloud. I inherited that from him. So, I was looking straight ahead as I responded.

'That's nice, Dad. Thank you- (hug) I appreciate all this... whatever this is...' he was looking at me with glass eyes wondering what I was thinking about his project, that I did not like- I knew him that well to know that I was hurting him for not like this... I could see it in he is fading eye color. Besides, I give up looking in his body as he sits slouched in the set. No need to add that in, me being happy in this town is hopelessness- with this thing. He did not need to suffer along with me for not getting it. Yet I am not saying anything about something that is free or given

to me as a gift. 'Well, now, you're welcome,' he muttered, self-conscious by me thank you 1,000 times.

Looking out outside- The entire thing was jade: the trees, their trunks enclosed with moss, their branches droopy with a canopy of it, the ground covered with leaves. Even the air filtered down greenly through the leaves.

We stared out the windows in silence. We swapped a few more comments on the weather, boys, my period, and gross things that dad should never know about a girl alone time in her room- and where she keeps all that- me- which was wet, need a bathroom bark and him to go away so I could go to my room- something else that was old and musty... and that was the dialogue. I thought in my room I would find myself deep down- It was lovely, unquestionably; I could not deny that fact. In a round room- I lay in bed and can see out... It was too green- and colorful to me.

Yet all I wanted to do was get off- and get to read a book and go to bed. About the time I got their dad bust in the door seeing it all- so freaked I do not think I will ever play with myself again, yet do you stop or keep going is the question. Eventually, we made it past the fact that I was spread sparing all of it on the clean sheets- all he got out was welcome home Lily- that is all he said- walking back out the door. (I did even know she knew how to finger. Awe- wow I do not want to know this- where's her mom- or getting her this- Lelo Ella dil... Ah- I can say that? Not even down the hall, I hear her, and the humming- I not ready for

this...) He still lived in the small, two-bedroom house that he had bought with my mother in the early days of their marriage. I look in the glass- and see me the girl with like no chest- I see my hair- as I flip it back over my shoulders... I am not happy with me- or him- or the car- or life, or the fact I have no private just to have some girlie alone time. The door is never locked it would lock... so what do I do about that one? Those were the only kind of days their marriage had- life and play in it. back in the day where they nicked on the street- and feel it up in their room all the time- gross- yet I know that too- in front of the house it has never changed, all yellow and cracked with paint- the windows fogged with steam from hot to cold. I was never like new- well, new to me- like the car in the garage- just something parched over and made as they say right. The car has rounded fenders and a swollen cab and 4 doors, not 2.

It a sports car? I asked new- buy it has the kind of power- I was like yah, right? This would blow the jeans of these boys Toyotas; I go to school with and see two kids banging in one that what got me... I see sex is something they study here... this place is shitty, to say the least- I to my penetrating astonishment, I loved it... when I see how the boys look at me in it- but one boy. I did not know if it would run like this, but I could see myself in it... downing my hair and make-up and blowing kisses to him. He is my fantasy in the day before I sleep and in my sensual dreams it is all about him- yet I not going to pass up on other looks... I am a girl. And more, it was one of those solid iron dealings that never gets damaged

even if so- you are okay with it- the Japanese car's if I were to wreck would be destroyed yet I could roll this.

'Wow, Dad, I love it! Thanks! I said after coming home from school the first day I did get to say much to anyone I was in la-la land with the boy with the eyes and the hair- and the car.' Just daydream- there is nothing on the first day anyways other than hi- and this is what you will be doing, and you all have an A for now. I got so sick of hearing that line- okay that nice. (Back) It took only one trip to get all my things upstairs and into my new girly room. I here- like- acquired the western facing bedroom, which looks out over the back yard. The room was at home with; it had been in the right place for me since I was born. The wooden floor, the light pink walls, the shiny tin like ceiling, the white lace curtains around the window and pulled back in V- shapes -these were all a part of my childhood, yet I am not a little girl- yet daddy is not getting, that one- like her docent even think I sexily active- ha. The only changes made were what my dad has made were moving the crib out for a big girl's bed, and even that is a day bed, and adding a desk as I grew, and taking down the playpen. The desk now held a secondhand typewriter that is 1888, and a phone with the cord on it- and an old apple 2 next to that no internet the line for the modem stapled along the floor to the nearest phone jack. This was a stipulation from my mother so that we could stay in touch easily.

The rocking chair from my baby days was still in the corner. There was only one small bathroom at the top of the stairs, I did not even have my own, which

I would have had to share with Dad. I was trying not to dwell too much on that fact. One of the best things about dad is he does hover- and that is also the sad thing too. He left me alone to unpack and get settled, as you know, a feat that would have been altogether impossible for my mother not to have busted in on too- yet she is a girl. It was nice to be alone, not to have to smile, as well as look satisfied; a relief to stare dejectedly out the window at the sheeting rain and let just a few tears escape. I was not in the mood to go on a real crying spree. I would save that for bedtime after- or in the hot shower where you could not see me doing it when I would have to think about the coming morning. Bradford High School had a terrifying total of only three hundred and sixty-five - now two hundred- students; that was on the first day the drops started, many for the teachers saying give up on yourself- and smock pot- or something like that... there were more than seven hundred people in my junior class alone back home. All the kids here had grown up together- their grandparents had been toddlers together.

(Back)

I would be the new girl from the big city, a snooping, and a freak creeper. If I looked like a girl from Pa should, I would think this way... said, dad. Like putting something on that is not see-through, nevertheless and, I have never fit in anywhere really. I should be tan, sporty, blond-haired person with big blue eyes- yeah- no- a volleyball player, or an ass shaking cheerleader all the things that go with existing in the valley of the sun rays. As an alternative, I was ivory- tender,

without even the reason for blue eyes or light brown hair, despite the constant sunshine. I had always been slender than most of the others in my grade at home with mom, but easy-going somehow, visibly not a sports person; I did not have the essential hand-eye coordination to play sports, like without embarrassing myself- and harming both myself and anyone else who stood too close. When I broke down putting my clothes in the old white dresser, I took my purse moving off my shoulder and down to the bathroom floor necessities and went to the communal bathroom to clean myself up after the day of travel. I looked at my face in the mirror as I brushed through my tangled, damp hair. May- hap's it was the light, then again already I- myself looked washed-out, all-natural without makeup and clothing just all me showing. My skin could like me could be pretty- if not for this and that- all the things a girl like me wants to change... we all do not say we do not. It was noticeably clear, almost translucent-looking- but it all depended on color. I had no color here... to speak of- facing my pallid reflection in the mirror, I was forced to admit that I was lying to myself, that I would be love for me. It was not just substantially that I would never fit in anywhere.

Plus, if I could not treasure a place in a school with three thousand individuals, what were my odds here? According to legend, when a human dies and then returns to the world as a fallen angel, he or she no longer has a soul. The unlucky individual is now a fallen angel. It was once believed that mirrors cast back the image of the body and the soul; therefore, if you did not have a soul, you could not have a reflection. Mirrors also used to contain some silver (not anymore,

so do not go and break yours up trying to score beer pennies), which could also have made a fallen angel's reflection hard to see. Silver, as pretty much everyone knows, is toxic to the undead. Seriously, if you do not know what you have been doing with your life? Enjoying it?

Knows that fallen angels suck ... your blood!

Seriously though, do you know the history behind modern fallen angel lore? These creatures of the night have been lurking around for an exceptionally long time, although the princes and princesses of darkness have taken on different guises and mythologies throughout the ages. Here are some things you did not know about fallen angels. If the items on this list are old news to you, you might want to look in the mirror and check for a reflection... your blood! Okay. It did not work so well at that time. Ancient Egyptians had all kinds of gods. The warrior goddess Sekhmet had the bad habit of walking among men, slaughtering them and then drinking up all their blood. She needed thousands of jugs of blood, sometimes mixed with beer, either to quench her incredible thirst or because she was an unstoppable party animal. One of her nicknames was the 'Lady of the Bloodbath.'

Another was 'Lady Who Maybe Stole My Cellphone.' If she ever is reincarnated, you might want to refrain from inviting her over for your next Halloween costume party, because she will ruin bobbing for apples like that. Let us see, cows are grouped in herds, geese gather in flocks, fish in schools... What would you call a large group of fallen angels flying your way? Well, other than

'nothing good is about to happen,' you could officially say, 'Look, there is a brood, clutch, clan, coven or pack of fallen angels over there. We should head in the opposite direction. Wait, I dropped my thesaurus. Do not leave me, my only friend!' Why I say this and what I must compare to with the eyes of the stocker. All right, the historical fact that Dracula was not a nice guy is stating the obvious, but the level of his evil is quite shocking. It was said that Vlad of Walachia, who also went by 'Vlad the Impale,' never ate a meal without Ottoman Turks, impaled on stakes, dying all around him. This 15th century Romanian monster left, at one time, 20,000 corpses stuck on pikes outside of his castle as a warning to all who would dare challenge him. When a corpse became too rotten to display any longer, Vlad had no problem making a new one to take its place. He took his nickname very seriously. ('Vlad the Home Decorator' never quite took.) This does not always work. If a fallen angel bites you, not all hope is lost.

Different societies believed there were different cures for the affliction known as Fallen angelism. Here are some things you can do if you suspect those marks on your skin are not from a mosquito, or you want to keep an unwanted fallen angel away: ... Eat lots of Basil- No ... Gather hawthorn branches and use them as a repellent (they also make lovely wreaths) ... Bury potential fallen angels face down so they will dig the wrong way when trying to get out (fallen angels are mad dumb.) ... Spread salt around the house- NO ... Wear a cross (an easy decision) - NO - Decapitate the fallen angel bothering you- Yes, they hunt you down- for that moment they so need with you- love or creepy?

You pick...? ... Wear iron (not silver) jewelry- NO ... And finally, scatter seeds around your house because fallen angels like counting them and can get distracted, which will give you time to escape.

Myth does not know... - No Can be killed with a wooden stake yet that old customs. Well, suck your blood for fun- Yes and No... their fussy these days, like the will not pre- untouched girls... that how most boys should be.

3

I did not communicate/interact well with people my age at all or at least in my hometown I did not. The truth was that I did not relate well to girls, period and boys or just dumb d*ick suckers at my old school.

Even my mother, who I was closer to than anyone else, was never in agreement with me about my choices of what I wanted in life, never- ever on precisely the Lily page. Now and then, I marveled at seeing the things within my eyes, which the rest of the world was seeing within theirs. There was a fault in the stars, some were down the line, in my life, and my brain. Conversely, the reason did not matter... All that signified was the result or outcome of all that I and they see.

Besides, tomorrow would be just the commencement. Do what is magnificent to me and you. I did not sleep well last night, and even after- like- I was done crying. The continuous whizzing of the showers, besides the wind across

the roof, would not diminish into the upbringing. As I pulled the faded old quilt over my head wishing I were not scared of everything and everyone- the past hunting me like he eyes investigate mine in my room even if I do not know him yet, and later added the pillow under me to rub on- it feels good like a boy would when you need a hug. However, I could not fall into a slumber 'til after twilight, and the moon showing its soft light down on me when the rain lastly developed into a softer relaxed trickle overhead in bed. The dense fog- broke away in the sky so I could see all this out the double doors on to the veranda of my room, was all I could see out my window in the daybreak, as well as I could feel the in closed spaces was all like creeping up on me. You could never see the sky here or so I thought; it was like a barred enclosure. Mealtime with dad was a quiet event before the school day like at 6 am. He said to me- good luck at school- hun... and do not get pageant. I winked and walked out of the room rolling my eyes with a simple look on my face. Good luck has a habit of dodging me, for I suck hard- at life, and everything wants to suck that out of me too. Daddy after me, off to the mains for an early shift, that is his wife and family to him breathing in a little coal dust- that was what made him feel alive- you can hear it in his whizzing hacking. I would drive away- looking for the right roads to go down to be the doors on time...

(Thoughts about the home)

My mother had stained the filing cabinet seventeen years ago, to bring some daylight into the house. Over the small firebox in the next-door small, yet

family-sized room was a row space where pictures hung next to the steps. Look over all this slowly- like I am doing now- the first photo- a wedding picture of mom and dad in a small church outside the town some... then there is one of the three of us in the hospital after I was born lovely- and gross, taken by a caring RN, keep an eye on by the demonstration of my school pictures up to last year's- look at that girl that has no teeth in the 5th grade- and then braces in the 9th. Those were awkward to look at- I would have to see what, I could do to get dad to put them somewhere else so I do not have to see him go down the line saying the - old story that, I have heard over and over about me being the little girl he has loved- and lost- like- to his b*itch of a wife, at least while I was living here I saw that... It was awkward, being in this house, not to grasp, that dad had never gotten over my mom even if it is a man about it- he loves her still. It made me feel uncanny and mysterious about everything I do not get. Is that how you would define 'uncommentable'...?

That nice for that is not the right wording, and you should know that... I did not want to be too early to school or tardy, on the other hand, I could not holiday in the restaurant any longer. Yours truly threw on my jacket- which had the feel blob-ie of a way too big- and controlled out into the showers- falling harder now. It was just hammering down still, not enough to soak me through- directly as I reached for the check to pay- that was always hidden under the cup- I had with coffee in it. Now out and under, the roof space by the door, and looking up. The splashing of my new spotted water-resistant rubber boots was fear-provoking- to

me was it had never rained before in my hometown. I missed the pavement and not the typical crunch of gravel as I walked. I could not pause, also to appreciate my car again, as I wanted to do so- I was in a panic to get out of the misty wet, which whirled around my head and body, and clung to my hair getting all matted down with drippage. Inside the car, it was nice and dry, yet I did not want to get the inside muddy or wet, yet I did not see myself doing just that. It will clean off- my dad said- the night before- do not worry about it... it is an everyday driver car. My dad had noticeably cleaned it up, but the tan padded seats still smelled new, yet the car has that used old must, like old gasoline and oil. The v8 engine started quickly, like always after cocking it... to my relief, it is old yet good, but loud roaring to life, and then idling at top volume until I had it set right. Well, a truck this old was bound to have a flaw.

The antique radio worked, a plus, that I had not expected. Finding school was not tough the second time around, the school was, like most other things, dark and depressing, just off the- what that call a highway. It was not obvious that it was a school; only the sign, which declared it to be Bradford High School, made me stop and think I would fit in some now- like a fresh start. Like looking at something from the 1950's, built with burgundy-colored bricks. There were so many trees and shrubs, that I could not see- big to small... where is the feeling of the organization? I wondered nostalgically. Where were the mesh fences blocking out the rest of the world- and the town?

I parked in front- with the first-year students- for I was cut off by most- yet they know me now by the car- the lot with the building which had a small sign over the door reading breeze-way- to hallway. No one else was parked there, so I was sure it was off restrictions, on the other hand, I obvious I would get directions inside be some creep wanting to feel me up instead of circling in the rain outside like an idiot like I wanted to do. Already it is going to be a long year. I stepped unwillingly out of the toasty truck cab and walked down a little stone path lined with dark hedges. I took a deep breath before opening the door. Inside, it was brightly lit and warmer than I had hoped. The office was small; a little waiting area with padded folding chairs, orange-flecked commercial carpet, notices, and awards cluttering the walls, a big clock ticking loudly. Plants grew everywhere in large plastic pots as if there was not enough greenery outside. The room was cut in half by a long counter, cluttered with wire baskets full of papers and brightly colored flyers taped to its front. There were three desks behind the counter, one of which was staffed by a large, red-haired woman wearing glasses. She was wearing a purple T-shirt, which immediately made me feel overdressed. The older blond-gray haired woman looked up. 'Can I help you- she was nasty in more than one way?' Everything looked straight out of the 50s. 'I'm Lily Lea Kingston- Amzel- or was before, I was adopted by the daddy, I know Mr. Anderson.' I remember a little my stepbrothers and sisters like- Gracie and Grant, there were many- I see the many graves in my mind and that house. 'I have your schedule right here, and a room buddy from school.' I well-versed her, the girl next to me said here I got this- and

saw the instantaneous awareness light her eyes- like she had a girl crush on me. Do not hurt me- I said out loud- oh I was not just going to show you around- why? I want to be silly- she said. I was expected, a topic of gossip no doubt.

The woman looks up and said this is my daughter, I asked her to do this for your new- be nice you too. And have fun and welcome to Bradford hun! Say hello to your dad, he was a slacker in my class back in the day- your mom my pet! I smiled some and walked out the door with her girl holding my hand awkwardly- I do not want the boys or one to think the wrong thing. Girls can do that right...? 'Undeniably,' she said... to me for I was thinking aloud. I get sick of hearing that one too, I can say what is on my mind. She dug through a precariously stacked pile of documents on her desk till she found the ones she was looking for. She brought several sheets to the counter to show roe, as I sat in homeroom with the boys looking at this girl- be too chatty with me- and like I was something they did not understand.

To friendly some- a boy was sniffing my hair. Also looking down my backside. She went through my classes for me, prominence the best route to each call even if school is a nightmare to get from one place to the other. Doors that lock- themselves, I love it! Boys that cannot keep their hands to themselves, I love it! Teachers that do not see anything- but you; I love that too! She gave me a yellow slip as late pass, so I would have each teacher sign stating- I was the new-be, asshole from CA! CA to PA! I came with you on the second day! Which I was

to bring back at the end of the day with all the names to see if I was making it as an ass here. If I hear about this girl bleeding one more time- I going to shove something in here- and it is not there- I just want to jab pins in my ears! Back to my first class, this girl was with me the whole freaking day- sucking my butt- not literary, but close She smiled at me and hoped, like dad, that I would like it here in this d*ick of a town- was I well pledger it as I did in my hometown. Speaking of that god look at that boy looking at me yet again- I smiled back as realistically as I could of his dreaminess. When I went back out to my car, now at the end of day two, other students were starting to arrive outside with me in the lot. I drove around the school back to the lot I should have been in seeing all the - faces within the day- their mouth hang some with me being in my ride... following the line of traffic out and down the hill. I was glad to see, that I was not killed or flipped off- nothing flashy look at the tiny sh*it wagons.

All 2000s and crappy made... on the road- coming up to my home where I now live- I passed all the home were some have less than me- was that possible? The few lower-income neighborhoods, I could see that they were hatting on the prey girls- the group I may get it with some hope, it the boy with dreamy eyes takes me... anyway- my home is one of the shitty- nicest home as they call it... I hear chat already about me and where I come from. Something I did deserver to just have fallen out of my ass hole. They did see the car- yet that is going to be next, I am sure. It was a common thing to see a new type of student in their clicks. The nicest car here was a shiny Toyotas only a year old, and it stood out... next to the

miss maxed dinged up and jacked up crap everyone else had Still, I cut the engine as soon as I home and pull in the driveway- reflecting on the day- as I was in a spot of time lost in the daydream of the boy so that the thunderous volume stopped with a backfire- that would not draw attention of the old bitchy lady next door that I know she thinks I am the new town slut. Yet her grandchild girls on the see-saw are getting off- and no one gets that one. It is bouncing the sit out of it... rub and play, that all I will say...

(Back)

I looked at the agenda, trying to memorize it now the days and the rotations- with the times that change too; with any luck, I would not have to walk around with it stuck in front of my nose all day, like the kick my ass sing on my back and re-tard on my forehead with black sharpie. I stuffed everything in my handbag that is bigger than me, with every food snack and drink you could want, slung the strap over my shoulder, and sucked in a huge breath one that I did not think I needed to take- yet I would surely pass out. I can do this sh*it! I lied to myself weakly. No one was going to bite me- not yet anyway- with some of the eyes on me- and with some of the looks I was getting- I was begging to wonder that one also. So far, I knew I would be asking for it if I could get it- and I want him- oh yes him to do just that... kiss and suck on me, that what every girl wants- right? I kept my face pulled back into my hood as I walked to the sidewalk, crowded with teenagers. My plain black jacket did not stand out, I discerned with the release.

Back thinking about the day... The classroom was small. The individuals in front of me stopped just inside the door as we wanted of the first bell, off down the halls you see the kid in their lockers or fiddling with the lock on their way for homeroom. I imitated them and did as they did, they were 50 or so girls, one a porcelain- colored blond-haired person, the other also pale, with light brown hair and the others had dark to what I could see without glasses it was a fresh look I was trying. At least my skin would not be a standout here, with all the others that a far face like fallen angels.

They all look at me like a tasty snack before bedtime. They also want me to be the headliner in the story. I took the slip up to the teacher, a tell my life history to every class that day; a hair-looking best friend whose desk had a plate classifying him as Mr. Tomeans.

He gazed at me when he saw my name- he snarled at me- like I was cow-shit on his floor! Not an encouraging response to say the least- I knew I was falling already- the second day of this... and for sure, I was pissed off with no way to say what I wanted to- and I beamed red... with frustration and pour- anger. But then again, at least he pointed me in the direction of an empty desk at the front next to the speed kid he compared me too without introducing me to the class.

I see I am not the class retard. It was harder for my new equals to stare at me in the back, nevertheless one way or another, they accomplished just that. I kept

my eyes down on the reading, an assignment that was given- a list the teacher had given me to do of why I need to be in this class- typing my name- and no basic pc skills. I had already read everything I needed to know- last year in my old school this shit was dumbed down, yet the teacher thinks I am the one that is the dumbass in the room. You need to do this over- why?

For I said so- that not an answer I said- you do not talk here- that is comforting... I said- go to the office... I questioned if my mom would send me my folder of old essays, so I would not have to do all this over- yet I sure with this ass it is going to be more than once of each one, or if she would think that was cheating. I went through the different arguments with her in my head was spring at the fact the teacher was a jerk to me and some others like me that were new or a type that was not his pick, while the teacher murmured on, not saying much of anything at was worth hearing about... there was even a back story here of how he loves fishing- and why his ears were so big- and taped back as a kid. When the bell lastly rang out in, a muffled buzzing bon-n-ing sound, a gangly boy with skin problems, and hair black as an oil slick leaned across the aisle to talk to me. 'You're the CA girl- your name I don't care to sit- he looked like the more than usually unhelpful, dick you no... from your past- the kind of creep, that hangs in strip club shoving money down young girls' undies, for the hell of it... 'You CA girl' he said- I modified that with my name- yet again his said I do not care what your name is. Everyone within a four-seat circle turned to look at me, being the target of his dumb puns. 'Where's your next class?' he asked.

Why?

He said- you are not going... I going to sit on your lap until you get this right- it is right. I said- no... I say not, he said to me... 'You go and you fail.' And- I walked out! I had to investigate my handbag, for were to go... yet I was not staying there... for his crap. There was nowhere to look without meeting curious eyes. Or teacher, that did not get the CA girl.

I am heading toward the environmental room, I could show you the way... the girl, who was not in my calls beforehand showed out of no were- I could have used her there- hilarious you never have half eyes, when you need them.

Over-Helpful. 'I am Julia Lynn. Jones,' he added. I grinned timidly. 'Thanks- I need you.' Awah- a friends then? She asked, I said- all sure! (Forward up to the end of the day) We got our coats, and I dumped off my books all 10 that were weighing me down and headed out into the rain for the car that I hoped would start fast. I could have sworn and not under my breath about the whole day- several individuals in arrears around me, were walking close to me and her, so much, that it was enough to eavesdrop. I hoped- I was not getting paranoid about them all not liking me. The girl Julie- we talked about my movie yet that was everyone here, and children chat... yet it was nice to see someone with a friendly face being nice to me... she was the only one, so far... I was being optimistic. 'Very...!' 'It doesn't rain much there, does it?' she said- nope- do you want to come over- sure... and she did- she was the first in my car too. 'Like- only 4 / 5 times a year.'

'Wow, what must that be like...?' she deliberated. 'It's Luminous,' She asked me? I told her yes. 'You don't look very bronzed- or covey- or virgin.' What? I squid- how would you know that- that what all the girls are saying you no. will I am- that one and sun- I was the indoors type... I hate sports or things that make you sweat. When to her home instead- where her mother is partly passed on something like alcoholic... that is mixed.' She willful my face in trepidation, and I for one moaned with a long gasping sigh. With some hand movements, and eyes rolling to the right. It looked like clouds, and a sense of humor did not mix. A few months of this and I would forget how to use sarcasm. Next day- (lunch) -We walked back around the lunchroom, not long after I had a gym, so I did not want to overeat.

My girlfriend Julie walked me right to the door, and down the line, though it was marked where I needed to be with their looks. She is not a prep- yet not a speed kid either- I not that just making a comparison. 'Well, good luck,' she said as I touched the handle. 'Maybe we'll have some other classes together today.' she sounded careful looking down at her list, and then mine. I smiled at him vaguely and went inside. The rest of the morning passed in about the right- fashion. My Trigonometry teacher, Mr. Meyer, whom I would have detested anyway just because of the subject he taught, was the only one who made me stand in front of the class, looking like a dumb butt- and having to do things I hated, I never like reading in front of others or familiarize myself with fresh faces. Me- here- I mumbled, go red, and trip over my own feet on the way to my seat. Ha, I can rhyme... nice right?

God, I am dumb! Subsequently the two classes I had, not long after lunch period, I was in progress to differentiate many of the faces in each period of all the classrooms. There was always someone doing something that I could not understand, or something wacky to me, and my ways of doing a thing- thing that I was not custom too... the thing that I knew where the wrong form that I would do back home. I was never one for the meet and greeting shit! It is just not my thing here... I do not like others- snobby as fuck! Plus, ask the - freak'n questions- and personal things, over and over about who I am. Diplomatic- drama- I do not give flying shit! About you or where you are from- or what you did or did not do last night with your legs open! - God, why? As well as that was not even in the front with the man talking up there... I was having a 3- way with my head! Them- and man up there saying feaking nothing! But- blah- blah- blah! I tried to be, but mostly I just lied a- lot. Tove Lo- Habits- High was playing all the time in my mind over and over- as I was singing out the lyrics. True with me and most girls now are just that- in and out of the school walls.

The Chain-smoker's- Roses, also was playing in my earbuds as I was walking down the hall with only one in... One girl sat next to me in the room, in both Trigonometry, French, and History, and she walked with me to the refectory for lunch like the day that passed- it is all the - just one day later. She was petite, like one foot shorter than my five foot 2 inches. In contrast, her wildly curly dark hair her look cute yet odd too to me- it was all part of her- and her way wacky ways... and her bouncing off the walls- like the difference between our heights she

was just a little offbeat, with the others. Brown eyes- that had to look up at me as odd too- for I was always the one to do that... I was the small one at my old school. I could not recollect her name, so I grinned and bobbed my hand to her saying hey to me, as she gibbered about teachers, classes, and his girlfriend that she is dating. I did not try to keep up with her motor mouth- and trippy wording, which was just too articulate for me to grasp. So, I just had the dumbest look on my face of augh! Us- she and I sat at the end of a jam-packed table with several of her friends, not at the lower end. Yet not popular either, whom I introduced her to Lily the girl Velcroed to my butt I swear, to you she is... I forgot all their names as soon as she spoke to them when I went down the extensive line of faces, which did not like me, that much for being the girl from CA.

They seemed impressed by her bravery in speaking to me. The girl from Jess, Paul, waved at me from across the room. They are not my type yet okay. You cannot have it all... I thought so why not. (Back) we were all there talking in the room seeing the eyes that were looking- and ours looking back- it is what goes on in the lunchroom- with gossiping an intake or all senses, trying to make tête-à-tête is with 5 or 6 enquiring strangers that want to know all the gross details of my life- love life- and girlie parts, that I first saw them. The only girl I like- liked was Lily. Not to date or anything- not yet- but a good girlfriend- witch I could trust here in this wasteland they call Bradford School, the groups all of them look over them with your eyes, they were sitting in their clutches some like the stoner in the corner- I do that shit yet not as much as they do- I would say we are all slackers

here- that group is now everyone. Look around all the IQs are 5% or less to me- yet they called me as that walking in the door. All the minds are lost in space- its ether the music- or the drugs- or the ass whole in- which they were brought up...

You can see the drugs rolling through this place, and the lack of caring for others, and the scents of those, which should just drop out now; and save us all from slowing down in the class were in together. Yes- I want to be as far away from that scene as I can- where I sat as possible in the long room. There were five of them. They were not talking, and they were not eating, though they each had a tray of untouched food in front of them. They were not gawking at me, unlike most of the other students. So-o it was safe to stare at them without fear of meeting an excessively interested pair of eyes.

However, it was none of those things which held my interest, and caught, my attention. I see a boy now looking at me, there were like 5 in a grouping- at the jock table smashing food into each other's faces. Yet that is most of the boy species, Unique thought I see this one was so much larger than the other in the pack there- to describe the boy- he is what I would call muscle, a weightlifter, with dark, curly hair, and completely serious. Another was taller, was less fat, but still powerful, with honey blond hair and green eyes- the jokester, of the 5 or so I could see that from here- not much of a reader- yet he was doing something author a book, that caught my eye- so maybe there is hope for the boys in the world. The last was lanky, less bulky, with untidy, bronze-colored hair. He was more boyish

than the others, who looked like they could be in college, or even teachers here rather than students. The girls were opposites... but nice if you could say that... one more than the other. The tall one was majestic to me yet not as a dream as him- over there... you see him- no keep looking. Do not miss him over all the others... anyways see this girl over there too she had a beautiful figure- cute something I want and might ask if... nah- at some point, the kind you see on the cover of the Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue- no heartbreaker you see more nudity in that these days, the kind that made every girl around her take a hit on her self-esteem just by being in the Lily room.

Her hair was golden, gently waving to the middle of her back. The short girl was pixie-like, thin in the extreme, with small features. Her hair was a deep brown, not long yet not short, besides pointing jagged like downward in that direction. They all had very obscure-like eyes notwithstanding the range in hair tones. All of them looking differing yet the Lily, to their style... yet not in the family. All of them had a white, paling face that was eerie to me and the way I look even, with me I am white, yet this was spooky. Like, have not become exposed for 5 years' sight. It was a sunless town anyway- you could see that- yet this was just odd to me. There are the palest of all the students, here in the varying room. There was like- no pigment in their flesh.

They also had dark shadows under those eyes - purplish, bruise-like shadows. As if they were all suffering from a sleepless night, or almost done

recovering from a broken nose. Though their noses, all their features, were straight, perfect, angular. But then again, all this is not why I could not stare away. I was lost in it all. I was seeing all of them looking at me as I was looking at them- all dissimilar. So diverse, yet- in a way- so comparable, were all overwhelmingly, coldheartedly lovely. They were expressions you never thought yah would see, to see excluding on the blended pages of a style magazine.

I could say it looked as if it was highlighted by a timeworn expert as the face of an angel with that look of angelic. It was hard to decide who was the most beautiful - the perfect blond girl, or the bronze-haired boy. They were all looking away, yet it felt like all eyes were on me - away from each other, away from the other students, away from anything as far as I could tell as of that moment.

Like the story- of forbidden... I see this go slowly. As I watched, he does... nothing but temptation, and lust... I was feeling for this boy... that was looking at me like I was his next meal. The- unbitten apple was like kissing his lips and I got the flash of him next to me breathing in my ear- and ready to do the same to me on the lips. Holding me tight just as he was holding the apple- squeezing it like a hug. I sip on my milk... and walked away with a quick, graceful lope that belonged on a runway. I watched, amazed at her lithe dancer's get up out of my set and step forward, doping my try- I see her doing the same- I sashayed through the one left side doorway, moving so much hastily, then I would have thought it was

possible with me being so clumsy. My eyes darted back to the others, who sat unchangingly.

'Whom are they... and why do they care about me- in this way?'

Lunch is now over-, and I walked to my locker to get books- from there I go to my next class that sucks- butt- I asked the girl from my Spanish class, whose name I had forgotten. For notes and a pen... As she looked up to see who I meant ... though already knowing from my tone ... suddenly he looked at her, the thinner one, the boyish one, the youngest.

5

He looked away quickly, more quickly than I could, though in a flush of embarrassment, just the same as I- then- I dropped my eyes... to that feeling... the same as he... did- oh so- shyly. In that brief flash of a glance, his face held nothing of interest ... it was as if she had called his name, and he had looked up in spontaneous response, by now had decided not to respond. Him- this boy- this one that I feel in love with at first look... He looked at my neighbor for just a division of a moment, and then his obscure eyes glimmered as they look the way into mine. Kids that do not get me- giggled, me I am in embarrassment, looking at the table like I did you want to run home and never- ever come back.

There were kids all around him blared out, all I saw- like was him... the- um- perfect love. That is what I want- and what every young girl asks for- Mr. hot young and right just for her- and only hers, not to share- and vis-visas.

I peeped out of the corner of my sight, at the beautiful boy and then full-on into the eyes of the forbidden, love stricken, I looked at everything that is him his hand, his face, his fingers, his body. And those eyes that I cannot stop looking at... the lips- kissing the apple... in a sucking bit. His mouth was moving very slowly passionately, his perfect lips barely opening as his hands moved away from his mouth.

The other three still looked away, and yet he was speaking quietly to them.

Strange, unpopular names, I thought. The kinds of names grandparents had. But that was in vogue here ... small town names? I finally remembered that my neighbor was called Jessica, a perfectly common name. There were two girls named Jessica in my History class back home.

'They are... very nice-looking.' I struggled with the conspicuous understatement.

'Yes!' Jessica agreed with another giggle. 'They're all together though ... eating- yet more into me than the food going down, I mean. And they live together.' Her voice held all the shock and disapproval of the small-town feel, I thought

unsympathetically- that was my first impression of her- I wondered if that would change at all. it would cause gossip if I did anything right or wrong at this point. It was said that his dad was something important to the town... a Ph.D. of the medical field, they had about 15 kids in their home at one time... not all theirs but- they seemed to all be the same in away. There was one in each grade... all good kids and old fashion if you want to point it out. ' You the type 50's whys of thinking- really kind over nice ... like it is nice for them to take care of all those kids when they are so young and everything themselves. They are young... also- it does not look right to me... when I passed them going down the street... in my car.'

Throughout this discussion, my eyes flickered repeatedly to the table where the strange family sat. They continued to look at the walls and not eat. 'I guess so,' Jessica admitted reluctantly, and I got the impression that she did not like the doctor and his wife for some reason. With the glances she was throwing at their adopted children, I would presume the reason was jealousy.

'I think that Mrs. Cullen can't have any kids, though,' she added as if that lessened their kindness. 'Have they always lived in town,' she said? I did not ask- yet I got the info. Surely, I would have observed them on one of my summertime's here with my dad in years past. I felt a gush of shame, and a release of anger. Disappointment because, as lovely as they were, they were popular- the most- of all of them. Respected by all... He must be, the youngest, one he looked up and met my gaze yet again, this time with evident inquisitiveness in his appearance. As I

observed summarily away, it seemed to me that his glance held more love than I ever thought possible... something... I could not explain. He has black hair... blue eyes... just everything right... I peeked at him from the corner of my eye- as I sat look past them all into those eyes, that glowed- like... and he was still staring at me- with lust, gazing hard, and long not breaking the look- I was it... confused was the expression we both had... Then I glanced at him again- like- he is gorgeous to me, I knew he was feeling the same it was showing to them all that heat me for it... of course, but do not waste your time. It was- said- in the chats, he does not date a girl- that- none fit his type. None of the girls here are good-looking enough for him, or slut is not the type.

My undies do not come off- ha- look at this one she not wearing any... she sniffed and whipped her nose- grossly, just pick it I thought- a clear case of fucking- freaking- piss-e grapes. I wondered when he had turned her down. my smile is hidden under my frown... as I bit my lip- shyly. I was nervous not to be late for class on my first day. I sat at the table with Jessica and her friends... The girl- I was saying about- she was shy, too... with him... yet his friend so maybe I will put up with her. His face was smiling, she turned away, longer than I would have thought- if I had been sitting alone, I would feel as she did. but I thought his cheek appeared lifted, after a few more minutes, the four of them left the table together. They were all noticeably graceful ... even the big, brawny one. It was unsettling to watch.

The one named Edward did not look at me again.

6

He and I- We walked to class together in silence. Just look into those eyes... As I walked down the aisle to introduce myself to the teacher and get my slip signed, I was watching him surreptitiously. Just as I passed, he suddenly went rigid in his seat. He stared at me again, meeting my eyes with the strangest expression on his face ... it was hostile, furious. I looked away quickly, shocked, going red again. When we entered the classroom, He went to sit at a black-topped lab table exactly like the ones I was used to. He already had a neighbor. All the tables were filled but one. Next, to the center aisle, I recognized him by his unusual hair, sitting next to that single open seat, we sat side by side. I kept my eyes down as I went to sit by him, puzzled by the unfriendly stare he had given me, you hard to get. I stumbled over a book and my own feet like always, in the walkway, between desks, and had to catch feel dumb... The girl sitting there giggled and then they all did when I fell into his lap... that looked nice... I had noticed that his eyes were black ... coal-black, then I saw his posture change from the corner of my eye... Mr. Shanner signed my slipup and handed me a book with no gobbledygook about outlines. I do is look at him during the class... I set my book on the table, I could tell we were not going to get along... me and this teacher... Of course, he had no choice but... but to be a dick... for me think the boy was more entertaining. I questioned my judgment on Jessica's bitterness at lunch today. She was not as

resentful as I had thought. The class seemed to hold out- on longer than the others with his look at me, and the other way around. Was it because the day was finally ending, or because I was waiting for his tight fist to untie? Was this his normal behavior? To look at me in this way. The way he made me feel as good and yet uneasy... I feel myself, shrinking in my chair, my spring of his lustful thought of what he could do to me. I could do so much to him... you could feel this in... in your mind. Then- the bell rang loudly in my ears, making me jump high- all twitchy, and he was out of his seat so fast I could not even see the blur. Tall- and good looking is all I could say... to that loss of my mind's thought... I was dumbfounded- over him. Blanking- I sat frozen in his wonder in my fantasies of daydream sex dreams... of rip him naked and kiss him all over... that body... that was right. I wanted to claw the shit out over him rocking- in my bed. It was not fair... no what do I do- feel lost without him doing this... I never- um well... feet like this... I looked up to see a cute at his locker, baby-faced boy that I have been thinking about non-stop, hair carefully gelled into orderly spikes, smiling at me in a friendly way- I want to touch yet could not- want to speak yet could not do that either- it would not work for me.

He did not think I smelled bad. We walked to class together; he was a chatterer ... he supplied most of the conversation, which made it easy for me. turned out he was in my English class also yet one room over. He was the nicest person I had met today, I wanted more... a-lot more. I wanted to be kissed... like all the other sluts I see... getting more than me. 'I never spoke to him more than two

words it was all in the way we looked at each other- that said it all- lost in the eyes.'

Some will not get this- and those that do not have to feel this feeling. I smiled at him before walking through the girls' locker room door. I was getting naked and think about him doing this too... God, I heat this boy for making me feel this way- why? The Gym teacher is looking at me- feeling myself up- 'what? Move it!'

'BOOB- SQUEZZING!'- save it for home- she said the new girl- in call the girls were mean- and we rain- and jumped and sat up and down- jump-n' freakin' jack.

7

It is a new day- I see him at the desk in front of me- in some call that has no name to me- so what I saying I do not give a shit- about it. The-hair- the face- the dick, it was all there right. He did not appear to notice the sound of my entrance. I stood pressed against the back wall, waiting for the receptionist to be free. Him- with the voice low and sweet, was doing all the same as before...

That is when I asked, and we did in the locker room... he trusted me into him... and it was all over I was in love with him more than ever.

The next day- it was like it never happened- he did not me-

That went on for 2 years me heating myself for loving him...

It was not nightfall yet, and no longer day, it was the time where it was hard for me to sleep and feel right about what I was doing to end the day- yet I am

a girl. The time of day when I wished I were able to sleep. Death, do you think of it?

Funny every day, or every time I have my hand here, I am thinking of that boy, him I am thinking about how I might pass on in this life if he were ever to go all the way with me. High school, cool- hell no- me cool I was at my old one. Or was agony the right word to say about the movie? If there is any way to apologize for my sins, it would be to say I loved the forbidden, a boy like him, this I ought to total toward the tally in some measure.

The tediousness was not something I grew used to; with him, day in and day out in the school's something I loved- something I cannot do without- every day seemed more impossibly repetitious than the last. I suppose this was my form of sleeping alone at night without my love. Lost in a dream would be fine, here is where I see it all unfold out before me... You can see me moving my way into the hallways- I started running through the jocks and preps and guys in coat in the far corner of the cafeteria, I was walking now her form the bathroom here, I did my hair and looked in the glass to see if my face had changed any from the morning- imagining patterns into them that were not there. It was one way to tune out the voices that babbled like the gush of a river inside my head. It was the first time- the first time- I fell in love with the forbidden- like the last time- I kissed haunted lips. The first time... Yes- now I am gasping for air after that long kiss.

Yes- I just got kissed- Kissed by the death- the kiss of what I was so longing for. Nope- nothing could ever stop me from dying... in the arms of the one that I love so-o. Nevertheless, I wanted too anyways... I want to do just that to keep him.

Maybe- I was too blind to understand, that faith could free me from this finally.

On the other hand, here I am wedged in a wooden box with a ton of dirt adjoining me, with blackness. From this never-ending obscurity and undying plague. I am just an ordinary girl for an ordinary town in having an ordinary life. It is not just box-like, why would anyone want to put me into this coffin? I am underground... no? Nocking- Nocking- Tap- tap- tapping on the box- yet was there everybody out there trying to find me? All hope was gone at this point as the air was getting thin.

8

Get out of here before you die- or am I died? I had only one thought- at this point getting out of it. I punched and punched so hard. Dirt was coming in like a river pouring into a shallow area. I must get out! I must get out! I must get out! My hand became swollen and bloody I punch the wooden ceiling- of this box hard! Questioning- with my thoughts of the mind- I did not want to die- like this, at least not in this why... The hard I taped the less, I felt okay with it all. It made no difference. 'Crap!' I should be bleeding yet I am not- I small and rub my raw

hurting fists. The worst pain was coming from within- and I was not sure why at this point- I was confused. What would it be? Why was this confusing happening to me? If I have one wish while in this situation, it would be to see why- why is the question.

I was so-so forced to think- and my mind eked, as I thought hard, and hard in the darkness and thinning air. I wiped away all the tears coming from my eyes as they ran down my cheeks- and yet I did not get why I felt this way at 15. Is it so- hard to think of the one last thing that I want- like a kiss- or more? Is it so wrong... to lust for an older man in you- and feel all that is you and he together- in love?

Was there never- ever any purpose in my life, until I found him? Or did he take that away from me? Is all that gone now? Is there zero- nothing- I ever wanted that badly to have in, and with me than him- what I could not have- I was coming to it some? Right now, should I be saddened by all this and the knowledge of this fact? 74 hours (about 3 days) have passed now so I think- soon as the oxygen in this box will run out... it is a matter of time. Just part of the fact that my life above was over.

A thought- My mother's resentful words started ringing in my ears. One day you will see what you did wrong, and it will come back to haunt you! It will be the only place you will have left to go to- and that is the place for forgiveness- if you can get it- at this point- she said- meanly. You need to be saved, yet you will

never be- she though, Mom- if you do not want to be the heated witch. Mom- Do you see... what am I saying to you? - You say you believe in Him. Then be with him- and that is what I did to be here now- where did I go wrong?

9

A crack- I dug, I pawed through the dirt-digging- digging- the small glimmer of light- I climbed, it is air- yes- I could the feel air coming in? I kicked and kicked until my feet were cut, but I did it. I got out, nevertheless, I had to hurry. 'Hey! Who is there?' A farmer calls out. I gasp in fear of being noticed and run more. I continued digging with my eyes looking at the light- of hope to get out, and I finally stuck my head out into the air. I looked at my surroundings- awe- it is all most there... I spoke. My breath quickens faster- faster- and faster- as I think about the world around me. Thinking about how I used to glance up at the brightening expanse of the sky, I bit my lip. I could see slivers of light within the box's boards. That is when I knew that I was not covered completely yet with the earth above me. That dawn was showing me the light looking at the patches of growing crops, I realized that farmers would be out soon.

Naturally, my heart-wrenching incomprehension, that I have been living a life which had no purpose... whatsoever? That is not true and not- yet I questioned. My life is not ending at all- and yet I question this also? All this was just a sick twist of my fate, just to see if I would get the picture. Like- to wake me

up and bring me closer to that resolution- this was all okay at my early age. Um-
hmm- I must hide before they run me out once again.

They- the ones that never- ever got me and him- in the first place. I ran-
like I never ran like this before- crazy though the woods they were greenish in color
with fog! As I ran towards the church, near to me about 20 feet or so away, I went
into it asking what I knew I could not have. I decided to go inside, and let the doors
close behind me so that the farmer could not get to me. I realized it has been really-
long since I have been to a church. The last time was when I was six-year-old or
so-or- like- a practical joke that life has played on me- by the fallen. That day is on
its way, where I fall too... to all the crap they say I have coming to me. You will
have no one to help you, I hear the voices of the fallen in my head giggling at what
I did now I am the dead girl walking- and I will feel the wrath- of the red flaming
man under my feet for it.

10

Mom- said- You'll see. The time will come when I am right as always.
Though- I am still not a believer- in what they call above- I am not of the one
below- until now- but it is funny either way to me for she said- the day would
come, and it did. Like- it was wished on me- by her and my hometown where they
did not get my type or his. At last, here I am, where I thought, where I thought I
would never be. Feeling hobbled inside as I did, I was astonished by what I saw-
and that was me believing in this... faith carp.

I could not believe my eyes- to all the things flying around me- seraphs. Could this be? No? Yes? It was... or am I hallucinating? At this point in my mind, I was too damn to try to differentiate between what is real, and what was unreal. Nevertheless, I see what I never believed in... I walk, to the front of the alter he looks up from the book in which he was reading. It is not a Bible... I was sure- I knew him, all right- the man up there standing as a father- he gives me his sperm which made my life- in more than one was- yet he hides behind the all-holly ways, it was my dead dad- like giving me his wishes of what to do next. It looks to be an old book on philosophy- that I still cannot get away from- therefore I gave up on it- you preach it yet does not live it.

11

'How did you get here?' He said as he smiled, and then closed the book- looking into my eyes to see if it was pure. 'You weren't hard to find.' He stands from the pew he was at and gives me a once over. 'It's a good look for you.'

'What...? Dirt and near-death?' He smiles again... The wrinkles around his eyes crinkle slightly, and the light caught his salt and pepper slicked-back hair. 'No-existence goes without punishment.' I do not know how long; I was out there hearing all this crap. It could have been all day; it could have been weeks. I do not know... I am so confused. 'You look good for a young girl that has been rolling around in the dirt.' He said mocking me- for he thinks I am the dirty girl!

'Heh- thanks... I guess- for doing this to me daddy.' I chuckled and looked at him. knowing he was the first too... and my mind went hazy-.' I must ask you something... I saw you back when they pushed me into the cold hard ground, and you buried me. Is that right? Haha- my child- you know nothing of your life and the wrongs you made.

Like- daddy you were there in the crowd- no? Ha- he was chuckling hard. Why did you let them bury me? I am your daughter, and yet you treat me like a stranger- or your altar server at night. That just not right... daddy, I said- with fear. He kept on smirking at me with that sideways smile. I yelled would you stop looking at me like that, I knew he would... -and my mind went blank-.

So freak'n creepy! It is starting to freak me out. 'You wanted me to stay out of your life' he said to her. That was one way that you would be gone, I knew you would come crawling back, you always come back. Like the little girl that you are, but this time was the longest you have been gone. It has been a long time.' He rubs his hands over the book and sighs. Saying- I am better than you will ever be- even with my sins- that you know nothing about. 'But I guess- if you genuinely want me to, I'll get more involved from now on- with you.' It was said. I frowned- like do not bother yourself. 'That didn't answer my question.' He smiles again in a creeper way. Even creepier than before. I thought his fake teeth were going to poop, of the so-o wide smile.

His eyes narrowed at me. 'Yes, I was in the crowd.' My dad raises his old, wrinkled hand to keep me from speaking 'Do you not ever freak'n interrupt me. If I had interfered, they would have killed me. Then who would keep an eye on you?' I can feel my anger rise. 'Someone who lets me get buried alive... how can you say that?' 'Yes, I had too I did not have a freaking choice! Okay!' I said- 'I just wanted you to give me some space, but you are meant to protect me and look after me. It sounds to me that you wanted me to be gone.'

I felt my eyes knowing they were getting teary, so I wiped away my tears; before he could see my cry, like the little child he thinks I am. How did I get this why? It was slowly coming back to me. Even so, what he does not know is that I had someone- that I loved more than him- and more than what he called love. We were a- lot alike with our past lives.

Yes, someone that loved me more than he ever could or would, that was everything to me. However, just like my dad, he was killing me in so many ways. Killing me slowly, mentally, physically, and spiritually. It is like he holds in my breath, and I can let him out. I know the closer he gets to me, the closer he gets to kill me with his lusting voluptuous kiss.

(Back before the end)

But- but- but- I want it! I want to feel it! That fine with me I guess, but we have not even made out yet! You are slowly sucking life out of me; I know you cannot help it like I cannot help loving you. Or did we...? 'If I have

to die to have your love then so be it!' THIS IS WHAT I SAID- AND
WHAT I DID- AND WHAT I LET HIM DO TO ME FOR LOVING LUST!

That is what I said to him. 'Just kiss me, AND

TAKE ME FOR YOURS'S- YOU CAN NOW- IT'S LEGAL- for my
mom signed for us... I cannot take not having you in my life. IT WAS SAID! And
if my life ends, then we can live forever, together if there IN THE afterlife, only if
that is if you choose to die for me too- RIGHT NOW. As I will for you.' KISS- So
what do you want to do? To kiss or not to kiss, that is the question?

WELL...?

11

(Now)

I will say that I do not want you in my life... OKAY.

LIKE- just I said to my dad.

Why must I push everyone away?

Nevertheless, which is just a lie. 'I want you! I must have you!' IT WAS
SAID.

Edward- 'I need you; I must have you! All of you! I must taste the kiss
you want to give to me- AS I WANT TO GIVE IT TO YOU. Till death do we part,

with all my heart, crossed and hope to die in your arms? I know that making love to you would rip us apart.' I recall whispering back in his cold ear- 'It is this love you would give me that would go right through me, as we would get ever so closer to eternal love. I want it! Do you want me?

Death is the passion, I am longing for THOSE kisses now down on my lips, and I will be forever yours! And you will be forever mine.'

The last time... I was in the church, and I confessed my love for you- I knew this would be like this it was all coming back to my mind what I did.

Beforehand asking if I would be forgiven, for my wrongs, even if I do not have complete faith I thought. I assumed what do I have to lose- I will try. I will get into the dress and confess everything to you. In-front of the man of God- yes, I would even if it were something, I was not sure about at that time. I said 'I do's,' and so did he. I knew that it was wrong. I knew that I was too young, so young that I am not sure if I knew what love was, or what it entailed.

Nevertheless, I said 'Let us do this, let us go all the way, and never look back, let us make the earth move tonight, I want to feel your breath on my young alive skin. I want to feel what it would be like when you are killing me with that kiss, as you take me for your lover now and forever. I want to be deflowered, as you place a flower on my grave and follow me to the promised land. 'Come and

hold my hand.' That is what I said. I breathed so deeply knowing that today would be my last breath at all.

10

The wedding night: I remember standing there unclothed- 'I quivered, I trembled, and I felt my knees knocking together. I could see him walking towards me. Oh yes, looking stronger and mightier than ever before. His manliness was just thumping in-front of me- odd for a man that may not be alive. I did not even know that was possible, or what that thing was coming for me.

Yet again- I am only fifteen years old.

My thoughts- I am so hoping that I am not making a big mistake, eager that your love for me is not fake. I do not want to be used, and left for dead, like men such as yourself, have done to me in the past. Everything I know and love in my life, I must forsake just to have you. Then I thought- Even if he does not love me, I know that I will never get away- or did I want to--I am young was not sure about anything for they say I can think for myself.

He is eye like my soul linked now forever- matted for life- overall. That-like his feelings of being with me- in me- well always be there like- looking over me, even if we do not end up together forever- in this afterlife. Not sure where we would go after that kiss of death. Even if he does not absolutely love me, as I do him... I feel for how bad I was- the first time. Somehow, I know that I will never

get away from his charm, never-ever being able to run away from his stony- yet glittery eyes, that make me weak and lustful. Like- well he always is looking over me, even if we do not end up together for always.

I will always feel him inside me!

Feeling all that is him running through my veins and driving me to complete madness.

Just like the poison- passion of that first kiss.

The kiss at the altar- was not the death kiss at all, it was the ones sucking down on my lips- and now the sucking kiss we are sharing dooring the lovemaking. He is coming into my bloodstream. I feel me pouring the toxins out my most erotic pulsating girly parts of my body. We will be bonded for life, and the lives that come after. We will be like one being or so that was dreaming. There is no escaping it now... nor do I want too. I just want it to keep on coming, it feels that good. Oh- what he is doing to me. It is ripping through me... but I love it. It is like spraying like pouring rain and it is mixing with mud on the ground under my feet.

Plus, I am drizzling with his poison all over my chest, face, and my girly opening, it is all coming out of me too, like a river of love. It must be the best feeling in this world.

Yes- I am spraying the wetness, it is dripping like my eyes when he was not near me all the time in the days of the past. And when he is not near me, he creeps in my mind when he is gone. He plays with my feelings- I know this.

The - way he likes to play with me in his cold candlelight bedroom. He builds me up so far and stops, and then when he comes for me to come with him, it is even stronger, just like I come twice as hard for him. It is the - way. Just like the candle that he blows out with his expired breath, he blows me to a place I never been to. As he crawls beside me, he blows that - icy breath on me, as he covers me with kisses, all over my little body. It is our first night sleeping together.

It must be romantic! His eyes glow like the full yellow moon at midnight, which I see from the cracked glass windows that rattle as the wind gusts through the maple trees. As I lay my tiny head on his motionless chest, I am naked and carefree and fall asleep on top of his chilly torso, I feel that rigid body that never needs rest at all. Everything is eerily perfect... naturally, I look forward to the dawn of daylight. In a way, I do not care if I wake up!

Yes, it was just that good!

Yet I must wonder what if...

Will I become exposed; everything is black I do not know... as love is being made- and I slowly start losing a life? Either way, I am contented, this is

when this all starts of me being in this haze. Like- just being in the arms of my love for this only night.

Is it black because there is no light in the room? Or is it black because I am dying?

Is this death?

If so, I did not see it be like this at all.

Where am I now?

I slowly open my eyes... I am not sure if I see anything. I feel freaked up in the head. Like I had the shit banged out of me. Which is possible... It happened. Am I died or alive? Am I alive or dead? Is he dying with me or not? Why am I not feeling his touch?

Am I bleeding too much- was the real death or the kiss of his fangs?

Should I be feeling something?

I feel the air getting bleak, am I even breathing, I cannot tell at this point? I never felt so alive even if this is the death, I never been so thrilled to death in my life.

'We should see the gates by morning. We should be inside in the evening.'

The last kiss was everything, all that I was hoping for, and more, but it was this darkness, that is all that was around me now or nothing more.

13

(In the coffin)

I am just dreaming about this.

Is this happening to me?

Am I seeming people, seeing me go down?

Am I not seeing him going down with me?

Do I feel the ground encasing me?

That is when I realized I was in this wooden coffin. Was I covered over last night with the earth above? At that time, I did not know. Was I dressed in a lacey nightgown and nothing else, I was panties-less, limp, and almost motionless with a red rose on my chest? I could smell the faint scent; it was from the wedding bouquets. Was there no one there to see me other than him when I was lowered down in these six-foot holes? Was he the one that placed this flower on me, or was it someone else? I want to know what happened.

Did anything happen? I will I had been my thoughts talking to me, and they were deafening.

I evoke hearing every one of those nine-inch nail being hammered in my coffin, which sealed my fate. Yet was it the kiss that killed me? Was it more than a kiss? Why was I put on the ground?

If so, was I still so much alive? Is it because of who I am? I cannot die... or am I? I am so confused! What happened to me last night? I can pound on this wood till my fist is blood-spattered, or is that blood or embalming fluid?

That is why I have slashes on my feet. I was drained of all my blood. Can anyone hear me? 'Hello! Anybody out there- I need help!' The cemetery is still, with only creepy hunting sounds, which I make up in my mind in fear. I am calling out for help, nonetheless, the skeletons next to me in their timeworn boxes in this old cemetery are not answering me anytime soon. It seems that the only memo I am getting out to the folks that walk on top of me is what is printed on my headstone.

And that is not much of anything for a girl my age, I never did anything spectacular. So, all that is printed in my name, date of my birth, and the date of my death.

Will I be saved, or was I? Why am I so muddled?

(After getting out of the box)

I am riddled with fear... so, I ran away from him. As I ran into the woods, something occurred to me. I have nowhere to go. No family that wanted me, no friends. Nothing, but everyone in town believing that I was a witch- even if

I were just an agave teen girl that wanted an old man that could be a fallen angel-
what is wrong with that?

They believed I was a witch, and a murderer because, I was found standing over a nine-year-old dead girl's body her name was Halley- she was his blood trust for the year- I knew- yet feed off animals does not work- or to stop that hunger for young girlie blood. As well as that, they all instantaneously made the town make their own rules- about me and what happened.

So, I had to run and never be found by anyone but him, otherwise, I knew I would be burnt at the stake. I heard the town's folks saying, as I ran past like a mad girl- that they were going to throw me into the river. And if I did not drown, then I am truly a witch- if I would swim. Either way, I would be dead for real. What am I half dead?

But- how, and where do I go now?

14

Edward- affirmative, I killed her I did not want to do it.

Then again, I had other reasons for doing it.

Yes, other than them saying- I had too.

Yet it was the only way I could be with her, being like this is not what I wanted.

I did not want to suck the life out of her, I have been dyeing myself for over a hundred years now, and I have been with a lot of girls, nevertheless, they were not like her. None of them have been as good as she was, she had me coming back for increasingly.

She needs me to come to her as I need her to come to me.

Who am I to you mere mortals?

I am a monster!

Something studied for being me...

15

Can call me by my current name-

Edward Damsel... This is true, that I wanted to marry for the last time.

No- I did not want to suck her blood, I said that I would stop doing this, but it is like sex- ones you do it with a virgin, you want to keep having it increasingly, and you have a bond to them.

I remember my first time. That was oh so long ago.... With her, I could not help myself. She was so young and lovely, so tight and fit.

I loved her ways, and her voice, and her little smile, she was everything I ever dreamed of before I became this. I am not one of those types. I fed off the kiss

and stopped before going all the way, I have had many young girls, and have taken a lot of them. In my lifespan I had many young girls like her fallen in love with me, and why not I am their fantasy man.

Yet I am not Edward Cullen, yet I am the next best thing.

They just cannot help it... I do absolutely love her; I want to stop doing this. I want her to be the last girl I am with... can a fallen angel be with a girl that was alive, that he killed in a night of passion, for being what everyone thinks is a witch because of it also?

Should I bring her back to life, and dig her back up to be a monster like myself? Should I save her and save her? We would be perfect together with a witch and a fallen angel, it could be a happy ever after for both of us. I know this will piss off a lot of people out there if I do this, yet that is half the fun. Come to my surprise, I went to the grave and she was gone... Where did my love go?

Come out, come out wherever you are! Oh, I see that you want to play a little game with me. Okay- I guess I must find you, my one-day-old bride. I cover my eyes and count to ten...

1...2...3...4...5...5...7...8...9...10!

I am on my way my darling! 'Yes, I ran from him as I ran from all of them, was he any different, I did not know. I was just like my dad in every way, I fear this fact. But my dad did not want to kill me, or did he? Christer-Edward did

not want to either, or did he? Even now I want to be killed over and over by his kiss... if that is how it needs to be. I still love him. Like I still love my dad. Even if he is an asshole.

16

I watched her fall onto the ground with me on top. Yet it was not her at all, it was some random dead girl, who looked to be the age of ten or so, that was hung- for doing less than I. I got off this poor girl and was horrified. So, I ran and jogged, looking for her once more... as she vanished into the woods- I did not know that she was not scared of me, and what I did to her- it was in love- all this- that I did.

(It was not even about the blood.)

I hope that this will not be the result again. When I found her- she was sitting on what I thought was a rope tree swing, all alone in the thick fog she was naked. 'No- No- No!' I screamed.

She was hanging in the air. I was wondering also if I went too far, and I did. That was not her heart beating at all, not... it was the leftover blood and embossing fluid dripping from her gashed feet. It was the sound of dripping on the ground, I could see this trail also from when she was running.

I am relieved that the hunger wolves did not descend on her. There is my love hanging from a nose, she knew they would find her. I know she was not afraid of me doing this. I guess she could not stand being without me.

However, should I bring her to life once more, so she can truly become like me and never die? Should I, do it? Should I kiss her again to bring her back to life?

Why did she do this?

Or did she?

(Back)

Why I went to him for love and someone to trust- it was the angry mob people from the town- I call them wolves, with their flaming torches, swords, and pitchforks from the village, which strung her up as she was running from them; for me to find because I did not do the job, they asked me to do. I guess killing her the way I did- was not good enough! I climbed the tree with more of a struggle than I thought was possible.

How do people manage to climb trees, and make it look so easy? I thought... she is unclothed. She is getting colder... so-o yes, she is dying- I said by the feel. I looked in my pocket, and in it, I was lucky enough to have my trusty knife and cut the rope, and this was of the dead girl that was hanging, and I kissed her and brought her back to life as a monster just like me. She became my little

girl- yet I knew I would lose her too- for being what I am to her- and that was her KILLER! YET, I ALL WAYS WANTED TO BE A DAD- NO I AM- and it was agent this 10-year old's well!

17

My new little love- my new little bundle of Lily, she fell to the ground, and that is when- I thought- I heard her make a slight gasp for air. Did I just hear that? Or was there someone there? I could not have a baby- so I strolled one for my own.

Naturally, I cut the rope, and she flopped around like a dead fish in the mud on the ground below. Then I climbed the tree once more, with her in my one arm, I did hear someone, and it was more than one. The mob of wolves come all around the tree, there they are pocking us with their sharp weapons- I hope they give up soon... or before they think about lighting us up.

Me being the man that I am... I saw that my girl... and was like I have too... she was dead at 10- that is simply wrong. Why? Cute- yet her hair and body were too dirty for my liking. I could not let her be like this. So, I am going to have to find a river, or something and bathe her! Before I want to give that long kiss to bring her to what I am- yet I cannot overdo it as you know.

18

No- I do not care if she is naked when I kiss her... do they- just if she has slickly smooth skin. It would be more romantic! Hum- they must have tried to grab her by that night she had on that, they hung her in, I put her in when she sprinted. This girl was charged with having a boyfriend at 10 years old- I say so what- even if she did- why kills her for it.

Finally, the mob gave up after an exceptionally long night of us sitting out on a limb high up in that tall old tree. They went back home to their families, yet I knew they would be back soon enough.

Like really get a life... I walked and walked, tripping over logs and sticks in these dark, and unsympathetic woods. Just holding her in my arms.

Almost like a baby in the arms of her daddy.

I found the river I was looking for, after walking for an exceptionally long time. Nevertheless, I ran to it. I placed her down, and then I got nude also, and I walked into the soft movie water in the moonlight, with her in my arms. Then I kissed her forehead... saying-' I will bring you back to me... I will- my love.'

The river was cold but refreshing. I got the mud out and off her face, and I splashed the water all over her and rubbed her skin with my hands, I washed her long hair, and brushed it out with my fingers. I had my sharp knife with me in my hand, and I shaved my girl, I did her underarms, legs, and vagina. As well as I

could, I know that she would want me to do that, she is a girl. And I am her man like her dad and let us not forget I am her savior. I have a right to do this... NO?

19

Plus, now it is the way I want her to be, I look at her, she is so sweet, even like this limp and not moving. She is perfect... to call all mine. She is completely faultless to these old eyes, as I lay her in the grass to dry off. That is when I found Lily- she walked up to me asking what I did- to this girl- that is why she ran- I got down, and I lay next to her also.

I look up at the billions of stars over us, with this mixed-up family- wishing on one that she was alive- like my others little one, so we could just hold each other- as a young couple with a little one would do in the town, at this very moment. Looking over the water, with the moon setting with it glowing on the reflection ripples. I lay my head on her chest, but there is no sound coming with-in her torso- of the little girl- she was now like me a fallen angel, with a witch for a mom- all I can hear is the river splashing. It saddens me at this most perfect of moments- that this was the outcome of both young lives for not understanding and judging before getting the whole story. 'You have to read between the lines to get it.'

20

The young girl- If only I could have the power to bring her to life- as I did with my girl that was put in the ground- just to cover it up- I cried as her limp lifeless body lay on my lap.

Even as she is dead, her hair shines in the moonlight. It just glimmers like the stars shining endlessly. Lily was my heart and my soul and yet she had been taken from me. A piece of me was taken and could never be restored as her soul would never come back. I look at the dark sky with its bright full moon.

If only there was a shooting star. Nonetheless, that's only superstitions. I remember my father talking about it as if it were witchcraft and to never believed in it or mentioned it. That talk was the only time that we had a good moment.

There were few I can assure you.

But then I am alone, dripping wet and cold. I know that the mob would not stop and search for me. The mob of wolves would continue to hunt me down in the daylight. I am suddenly getting hungry, and Lily was only going to slow me down. Then the thought occurred to me, how did the mob know where to find me, and that I was still alive too, I was meant to go down with her.

21

Edward- who betrayed me? Was it my unloving father or the girl I loved too much? Everything I wanted seemed to fade from me, I knew I had to keep

going or I was going to join her. I did not want to die. I am only eighteen, or so that is what everyone thinks.

(Back)

(The little girl's thoughts)

I am too young to die... she saying as she lead her to the tree... and I know my future will be big.

Like Lily- or mom- I must continue to run also, Edward I too- hiding and leaving the girl I loved too much, in random spots. As death in boxes to cover her up to this world.

I know I would return to her one day. 'Goodbye, my love. May we see each other once again?' Written by Lily- Maybe I needed to kill my father to bring her back to life, he is the one that started all this. Yet I swear that I would never take another life and kissing your dad on the lips like that to me is wrong. Yet it is worth thinking about. I chopped down several logs with my knife and rock, and made a lean-to shelter for her, I placed flowers that I picked around her now frosty body as a memorial.

I had to leave her behind, it was the hardest thing I ever had to do! I just want to give up and stay there with her. Yet I knew I had to go, but not for long, I would be back for her. When I had the right spell, love potion, or a night with a shooting star.

I had to find someone to help me with this rejuvenation or my love. I did not know if it was like a dance, which I needed to do or a chant, or what. I just did not know. I was clueless as to what it would take to get your back. Who do I see about this without them thinking that I am completely crazy? Besides, would it be wrong for me to want to bring her back to life?

She is the dyed girl I loved, that is resting in peace now- as I had to leave her there just for a while.

Treasured in my heart you will stay until we meet again someday. Death is the last chapter in time, but the first chapter in eternity. But my biggest question is will I see you there if I fail at this like my dad said I failed at everything I ever tried? God- I love to hate that man! He did nothing but abuse me. And as soon as I do, I find love... I must lose it. Is it because of him?

Why- I ask? Why me... have not I been through enough pain? I remember one of my punishments as a kid was getting locked into splintered wood head and hand locking gates, and the town would walk by spitting on me, throwing stones, my dad told everyone that I was touching myself, because I could not get a girl to have sex with me or get a date, and that was forbidden at the time. And doing that was considered a crime. He chased them all away- it was him, not me, which was the issue!

She was the only real love I ever had...! I recall my bastard of a father even tried to do it with my girl, asking her to get down on her knees, the night I

brought her home. I felt bad for him, I let him move in here. He tried to get her to make him happy. He would even touch her the - way, that I have seen him touch my mother it made me sick. I stopped him before she had to take it all down. He was falling drunk. That is why my mother let him, all those years ago.

He would tie her down to the bed, and do it so many times, and shove it in so hard that she bled out for days after. That is how I was made, he raped and sodomized her every night in ways you cannot even image, or do not want too. Now he wants to do them - with her no it is not happening. I will not let it. I would never look at a broom the - way. When she was fourteen, she got pregnant, and in those days, you had to marry the father of your baby. She said that if she got away, she would never come back, not even for me. Father blames me for her leaving, plus he did not have anyone to bang or bang around anymore, so he took it all out on me. If my mother were alive today, she would be 264 years old, then me.

She passed by giving birth to her second baby named Ashlyn. Mother, she bled to death from tearing and ripping when she pushed her out. Ashlyn was born in the early 1700s and died at the age of six, from drowning in the wash tub. I never met her... and heard it in the late 1900s and I am still alive. Sometimes I lose track of time and dates.

On the other hand, my wife was born in 1999, and she passed on that year. Good God how things have changed all these many years. I worked for the Ford Motor company in 1909, I saw the first model- T drive away. I have seen it

all... I remember the Titanic making the papers, as the ship that was sinkable. I have seen all the wars, I have even been in WW2, and was shot in the head. Yet I will not die... I just stay the - age of 18. I have graduated from high school six times, in different towns... Hell back in the early day's us boys dropped out in sixth grade, to work in the coal mines, I recall my lunch bucket scraping on the railroad tracks as I walk in the dark to work as a little one.

Yeah, I have been to school many times just so I would fit in. I have seen a lot of people die. I wonder what complete death is like... I would not know; I was kissed by death by a ten-year-old named Julianna she was the daughter of a nurse... I do not know why she picked me. She became my first love in my life, and she reminds me so much of Lily, anyways she was a fallen angel, so was her mom... I was deathly sick with pneumonia, in the hospital and she kissed me on the lips and that was it I was 18 forever.

She was my girl until my dad had her killed, with a wooden stake through the heart. I do not know if he gave the order... yet I blame him for her death too. I have no clue how he knew that she was a fallen angel, other then the sparkle of her big blue-green eyes. I have seen a lot of babies being born too. I became a doctor in that field, helping with childbirth, I made a promise to my mother that no girl under my care would die the way she did, legs open, vagina ripped to her butt, only to die on the cold table, with no one caring, as the placenta

is ripped out and thrown to the floor as the baby cries, for a mother that is never going to be there for her.

Yes, and the only reason, I must put up with my perverted dad, is that I know that he forced a sucking kiss on Ashlyn a day before her death. So, I am not sure, he is not going to be leaving me anytime soon.

Oh, and the only way I thought I could die, is if Lily and I kissed for so long that we both suck the life out of each other, or she ran a stake in my chest. Yet that is just mythology to me. All these many years, I never asked how to die or how to live, or how to get someone back. I wish I did, so she can live... I do not know I never asked, how this all works, it is not like today's books have it right.

Yet I want to live life with her. But what can I do? She is dead... So, saying that Lily was the only love I had, was not so... she is the one I chooses to live the rest of my days with now, just like all the other girls, when I had them in my life. I have a love for them all, and it never- ever lasted yet never- ever dies, even if they do. I do not think I am meant to have love, make love, or be loved. To some love is a kiss goodnight, a kiss on the forehead, a kiss while having sex.

To some love is kissing at a wedding, kissing in the rain. It goes on and on. To some love is having babies, something I will never have just like I will never grow old with my lover. To some love is a state of mind that cannot be controlled. Oh, how I know this more than most, in this hellish world we call home. To most love is just screwing now- a- days that is just how it is. To me, love and

kissing is a death sentence. No not for me... only for the girl that I love. They can live on resting in peace, yet here I am sullen.

Why? Why must I be angry... like this? I cannot blame God; he is not the one that did this to me. It is so hard to live with something you cannot ever-never have or get back. I do not have an answer for it or a cure. Yet! I just must live on without them, and mostly her and deal with it... as the town's people would say. Even so... did I do anything wrong? I do not think so... do you? Am I to blame for whom I became?

Was it my feeling to be picked for this? I love to death! I even love them after their death. I love them even more than the taste of their blood dripping in my mouth when I kiss them with my passion. I mean you must kiss your love to show that you love her... right? There are so many myths about me. Like I do not feel pain, that I am cold and heartless.

No- I feel pain, I feel so much pain for myself, for her, for them, and even for you. Its people like you and them that have ripped my heart out by trying to stab me with their wooden stakes. We do not need to die like that, we want to understand something clearly at last just like anyone else.

Oh, and yes, I have a bed in my room even though I do not need to sleep. Coffins give me the creeps! I have seen too many in my life, I do not want to sleep in one, because of that. I can be as warm as the next guy, more than him. I am

warm not in body but in my personality. I am not a stocker, I do not try to be a player, and I do not try to be a bad boy.

If a girl wants me, then she can come to me, and if she falls in love with me, I do not force her to stay; knowing the circumstances; it is her option to kiss me, and to be my girl. She can be with me in my broken heart forever! One way or the other.

I still could not fathom how the mob discovered my immortal gift. It was heartbreaking to see such people I used to know, and love turned on me so greatly. I am immortal. They fear me and yet they used to know me. They were my friends, family, everything I used to know and yet they feared me. They have the intent to kill because they fear what they do not understand. I lived too long to see how humanity works. I was born in

1672, and yet I know the future. What if I was not just immortal? What if I was god's vessel to this world? Has God given me the knowledge of the future that has yet to come? It is the 1990's as of now, a deadly era that punishes those for being different.

Religion comes into their lives every day and I am not their friend. I am different and that sentences me to death. I cannot stay here anymore. I had a shitty childhood that ruined me.

My father turned from me, took my girlfriend's virginity, and made her his sex slave. Just like that boy did to the girl that was hanging at ten- yet it was their say- not the girls. Just like- with my Lily. But no more shall he live. No more shall he punish me for existing.

He is a lazy bastard, that needs a good punishment, and good butt-kicking as well. I ran out of the woods where I had spent many nights, I hid behind my home, the house I once lived in with my love and my dad. I cannot believe this new perspective; I see things in a whole new light. This was never my home. It died when my mother died and was murdered even beyond when Lily dead.

22

Death is near, I can smell it! Now it is time for me to do, what I should have done years ago, when he bent my mother over, and suck it in my butt hole. Just the way he does with all of us. I am going to cut that thing off, so he bleeds out slowly, and dies the way he should. That way he can think about what he has done to all of us and are holes. I am going to make a hole where his dick should be and see how he likes it.

Indeed, it is safe to say that I have snapped, and it was love that made me crazy. I will throw it in the river, so the fish have something to nibble on. Yes, he has freaked the crap out of her, just like he did with my mother and all the girls that were in my life. I can still hear all the sounds of ripping, blood dripping, he got his

red wings every time, when he jammed it into her. The girl's every time there is calling out my name.

However, he had me tied up, or under his spell or something... it was like I was in a dream! I was so weak and could not come to their aid. It was the - way when I was a boy, I never remember what happened. Yet I could feel it afterward. To me it does not matter if it is the 1690 or the 1990's having oral sex then missionary sex, or butt over, and she says- no, it means no... do not do it.

Yet he never got that, now it is time for me to get my revenge! But I could not stop him, so I am going to make sure he never penetrates another child if I live. I just do not know why I did not think about this sooner.

Yes, I did it!

I cut the dangly thing off!

I suck it in and twisted it his ass hole- and left it there- to be F-ed like I was. I got to him when he was resting in his bed, he looked up and gave me shit. So, I cut him off, by cutting him up, down there!

Now with my father out of the way and depriving me of his company. Now I can get back to my lovely love, which was left behind, to see if this worked. Before I do that, I must let some of that red stuff come out, from his makeshift spout into a jar. It is what I need to pour in her to bring her back to life.

Yes, I asked someone who knows more about this than me. Before I came back home. I went to see a fortuneteller, and she said- 'That to bring her back to life, I had to take the life of who damned her soul and took her virginity. She added- Make the gash form the spot where the unjustness took place. Take his blood and pour it into her porthole to her soul, known as her vagina, and it should bring her back to you as she was. When you kiss her while making sweet and passionate love to her mix this in with your fluids.'

I was never- ever so grossed out in all my days. But I would do anything for her, I mean anything. Yet she was not 100% sure it would work, and I was not sure if I want to have sex with my dead wife. Plus, pouring my father's blood in there and mixing it all up in there on top of it all with mine. That is so freak'n nasty! There are so many wrongs here, it must be right.

On top of that, I was not the one taking her virginity, as I should. Hell, all I was getting his leftovers, again I might add, I feel cheated like always. It is like I am eating out his leftovers too and can taste it. God- that is vile! No matter how many times you bathe a girl, you cannot help but think someone else has been in there, and that is just not cool! Call me old-school but a girl should only have one lover in a lifetime, and that love with her should have been me.

However not even this can stop me from absolutely loving her...

I will try anything at this point. Who knew she might just get pregnant? That is the hope in my heart that she and I have a baby. If it is possible... for us,

and if everyone would back off, and let it happen. I know the mob of wolves would see her big pregnant belly, they would hold her down, and cut her open and rip my baby out.

Like a helpless little girl... they would kill her. I could see it now, them sticking her... ending it all before it starts. I can see her small nude body with the cord attached... go limp, and I would lose, yet another love of my life. I do not know if I could take seeing that.

My life just keeps getting increasingly disturbing, but so real. It has always been this way, all the way back to that day, that I have become one of these fallen angels.

23

So-o I just keep on running, running, and running! She is gone...! There is nothing worse than waiting and not knowing what will happen. Your imagination can be crueler than any kidnaper. Who would take her from her resting place? I must find her. I just hope that the mob did not burn her body, if they did nothing, they would ever bring her back to me. I will never- ever stop loving her! I will look for her until I cannot look anymore.

I am haunted. Haunted by all my dark childhood. I have been cheated out of having a good life. I had a bastard of a father. I had my mother's life ripped out

of my life. I had my one true love stolen from me, and yet her soul has not been strong enough to fight death.

Death is all around me. I have been kissed by death and it still was not enough to comprehend. I came back vigorously, and love that would never die. Here I stand in the middle of the lagoon covered with long grass, a pretty lake that glimmers in the sun. I felt empty. The mob of wolves stole her from me once again. I ran towards a small house in the woods and took the damp clothes that hung on the line. I heard a small twig break from a distance, I turned and saw a farmer with a rifle glaring at me with bloodthirsty eyes. 'Damn it. Please! Mr., please. I just need to find my wife- Lily. Please, just let me pass through and I will let you live.'

I held my hands up. 'You're the guy, the council buried. How did you live?' The farmer continued to hold the rifle up. I gulped and ran, hearing gunshots following me, as I ran further into the woods- getting out of yet another box. I knew I have been hit many times- with this all.

I came upon a 1956 Cadillac that was discarded, which was left in his field, it was sitting in the farmer's lawn, one crank and I got it running, and it was backfiring away. Now the search is on...! The farmer was pissed so I jacked his classic car. He was shooting his gun at me. It looked like a scene from a Bonnie and Clyde movie.

Nevertheless, I was on the run. Hauling butt and driving fast. It is going to be a lot faster to find her, by car! Thank God, it is the 1990's. There're no

cellphones yet in everyone's hands to reveal your locations or Global Positioning System or GPS to follow your trail.

As I stepped harder on the gas pedal, I saw in the cracked mirror, the farmer running out onto the road screaming his guts out. 'Obviously, he ran out of bullets.' I chuckled in laughter. Then something occurred to me, I had not laughed this much since my last memory of being with Lily.

I drove as fast as I could. Suddenly a deer ran into the road, and I swerved onto the other side of the road, nearly driving off the upcoming bridge, and fell into the water. I screamed in fear, like a little schoolgirl. My name is Edward, and I am a fallen angel, who is about to drown in water that cannot kill me. Why am I screaming my head off like such a pansy? I was no better than this...

I have had a lot of names; Edward is the one I use now- throughout the years to keep up with the time. So, people would not be able to track me down, as I fled from town to town. Christer was one in the 1800's Edward is not the name- I was given by my mother. I cannot reveal my true name to you. I am not sure I can trust you with that information. Sorry, it is not you, it is me.

I thought about everything that has happened to me. So much darkness's have consumed me whole, and I cannot overcome it. But it was my death that made it permanent. I am a creature of the night, who can survive in the light. But I am not stereotyped by fallen angels who sparkle in the light or ones who can burn in the

sunlight or have daylight rings to protect them. I can walk in the light and not be damned by others.

But then that is no longer true. I am a stranger among those who knew me and loved me. I stayed in the water thinking and daydreaming of the memories that made me think about how my sister drowned and how the water must have consumed her lungs. Sucking in more water. I was frightened by that fact, and I turned away in shivers and swore I saw her face looking into mine.

It was not her I see... No, it was a middle-aged man with a beard, hazel eyes, and dark tan skin. He wore an outfit of a religious man thought I was drowning; I was just floating. He pulled me and directed me to swim, but I was not going to budge. He grew angry and impatient, and his hold on me tightened. He was going under to help me. He was not going to let go, and I could not let yet another person die. So-o I swam above, and he gasped for air. 'Geez, man, you got a death wish. Why didn't you swim, you know you cannot keep your head underwater for more of a minute or so?'

He gasped more. 'Maybe I just wanted to stay there and drown.' I answered and looked away from him. 'Why?' he asked in confusion.

'Because I lost her.' I whispered in sadness. Lost?

Who? What? When? Did he ask?

Her...! I spoke. Who is this girl? And what did she do to you? He spoke.

'Oh, just the gal that set my soul a-firer.' I whipped- 'Oh never mind it's hopeless, just like I am hopeless.' 'Have some hope,' the man said. I said- 'Hope! Hope is for babies and people that are alive that do not know how to live.' I said- 'You didn't need to save me...' 'Um,' is the sound he made? 'I don't need saving.' 'You can't save something like this.' 'What are you saying my child?' 'What am I saying... I am saying that I can last forever.' 'That I can't perish.' 'Impossible!' The man said. 'I should bite you so you can understand.'

'The hell I have lived. You could never understand it.' 'Bit me,' he said?

'Nah- that's okay you're not a young girl so-o I think not.'

So, you have a lust for the flesh?

'Yes... biting and kissing is my whole problem, that's something you'll never understand.' 'Confess my son,' he said to me.' I said- 'What's the use, my soul has been dammed.' Then he said- 'Oh no but you are wrong, any soul can be saved, my child. Confess and the Holy Ghost will lead you on your way. To her whomever she is... Dry your eyes my son there is no need to cry blood.' 'I know I am not being much of a man.' He said- 'You're in love!' I nodded- yes. He said- 'That's all it is. You will see her when the time is right if it is meant to be so. But you must have faith in her and God above you.'

I wiped away my tears and watched him immediately jump up and out of the water. 'So, are you coming? Let us see the lord guide us, down the path to your

love if its right or wrong. What is her name?' He asked and led me to his truck and twisted his wet damp clothes. On the bank next to the truck. I said- 'Yes, damn if I do, and damn if I don't.'

'Before we go you sure you don't want to be baptized?'

Yes, I am sure, you might do that, and you will crumble to ash or something like that, for your safety I am going to say no. Did he whisper- Oh? I am not saying that I do not believe your ways, I do. I was razed to believe it; it is just I am not sure what would happen to me.

Being this way that I am. Like I might turn to stone. Then he asked me the most random question: So, do fallen angels use a bathroom? I said- 'I haven't taken a shit, in years, ironic everyone piles theirs on me!' Then I said- 'Why did you ask me that?'

'Because I need to find a bathroom soon! Fallen angels frighten the poo out of me!' 'Don't worry, I only suck on girl!' He giggled awkwardly. I snickered; he made me laugh. The second time since her death. 'Don't fear I am not going to hurt you.' If anything, you are my first friend. The first person to ever trust me, and that trust, and not think something evil. He said- 'Okay friend... will find her. Do you see those sun rays over yonder... our God is showing us the way?'

'I believe that!' I said... (With surprising newfound faith.)

'With the lord, he will help guide the way.

Come heartbroken person and let us start walking.

We are there. The lord tells us it is not far.' He leads me into the woods and furthers the watery spot. I have been led to an old warehouse that seems secret because I have never seen it before. I hesitate before going in. He may be leading me into a trap. There is a saying. 'Don't trust anyone and keep your friends close and your enemies closer.' He is neither friend nor foe because I do not know him closely to decide.

Yet I had trusted... but not fully trusted, I walked wheezing. There she was lying on the table looking at me with only the soul no life- this young sweet thing she was only five- I was asked to bring her back. I noticed she was still naked, and that sheet covered her body. I said this is not what you think I can do- it is not holy.

I turned over to the priest, he jumped like to what I said- what would be done but smiled. 'Um- If anyone asks, I never disliked you. Yet I have to say that.' I quickly took a step back and rubbed my neck tensely. I went back to Lily saying I would tackle the body of the young girl- and I did the - with here and now she is mine, not caring about what was surrounding me, and picked her up and carried her out.

'Hey, Priest guy! A little help!' I called out- as I was swept off my feet by the spirits- around me- and saw him come to my rescue- throwing holy water...

The mob was on their way- I saw them coming- lost and a lot of members and been taken away by others in the pack. 'So, I finally meet the creature of the night. Hello Christer-Edward.

If that is your real name.' He crossed his arms in a wicked way. It looks like I am not going to get out anytime soon.

He walked up to me I was just hanging around, 'so, it was all an act? You set me up, didn't you?' 'No!' Out of the shadows, a man slithered out, and said- 'It was not him; it was me!' I knew the voice- it was my dad! 'Son you never were good at anything, not even killing me.'

'I prayed and prayed to him to bring you here. You have two options, give me your body and soul or I take hers. Either way, son you have failed.' He said- 'Son I would not mind at all spending the rest of my days in her beautiful body, as a girl.

As you know I have no adulthood now because of you. I am the one that wants you to go.

I do not like you, I never did I wanted to kill you from the day you popped out of your mother. You are just like my dad in every way. May he rot in

hell! Son no one wants you in this town.' 'Yet if Lily is because of me, I can stay here, just like you I have been on the run.'

(I did not believe a word my dad said. I never did, he just wants to live in her so I die he knows that would kill me.) The holy man said- 'Put your trust in the Lord your ass belongs to your dad now.' Then he said- 'I must go now, sorry sonny, you are never alone, God be with you, and if you are not guilty; you have nothing to be afraid of in the eyes of the Lord. Let God have mercy on your soul.'

'Hey! - Hey!' He never looked back at me, and into the sun he went out the wood sliding doors. Then I remembered that I had my knife. Think Christer-Edward thinks to plan... I need to cut this and then cut him up into little pieces and light the pieces on fire before he clams her soul. Mine is already gone. Yet how? With my tiny love in my arms, how is this going to work?

Whatever I do I have to move swiftly! All in that - moment I could not help but look into the closed eyes of my beloved. Her eyelashes long and shut tightly, her hair awe taking, with soft springy waves. It was like she was asleep, dreaming the most wonderful and darling fantasy ever. It was like she was smiling at me like she knew I was there with her as if I was her hero! I know it is like she can slightly feel that I am with her. Yet I feel as if I will never trust again.

Yes, this act of betrayal of the first friend I had for a while had surely hurt me in ways you could never imagine. How a priest could turn so good to evil in a matter of seconds. God or the Devil had clouded his judgment. I had to get out and help my sweet Lily before they could tarnish her anymore. I put her over my shoulder and ran as fast as I could. I ran like the wind with a whooshing sound and headed to the car.

I kept driving until I realized something in a fairy tale story I once read. There was a prophecy that there was a special vial that could bring a dead person back to life. I must go and endure the most challenging trails to get there, but anything is worth having my Lily back, who has been kissed by death.

Like- a secret, of love, a secret of life, and a secret of bringing someone back to life. It was not so much as a fairytale, as it was more something I read in Romeo and Juliet. So, the journey endures, now for a pink poison that works in reverse. I left a part out, as I ran out my dad got tangled and trapped in the net that I was in with her, that is when he fell to the wooden floor. That was meant for me, and before getting in the - car to escape (Oh the farmer was in it too, he knew I would take this car.)

Like a bat out hell.

I snatched the gas can in the back seat, and ran back, and let that place up, I saw him burn. The heat of the flames in my old still heart was thrilling! With any luck that is the last time, I must see his face in my life. Yes, a vial just like the

lime green ones, which I can drink, takes me to a different time and a different place. Almost like a different life altogether.

I kept on driving and turning down roads. I am curious, if anyone sees me, I must not be followed. I looked back and hid my car in the bushes, as I went to our secret place. It was a little cabin out of town, where we would both hide and express our true nature. She is my little witch, and I am her bigger fallen angel. I went inside and the floor creaked. I lifted the carpet. and opened the hideout and picked up a piece of paper.

I have now gone over dirt paths; like the ground, she has been covered over with. I have even walked where there was no path at all, just like I did to find here from day one. But now it is to get the freedom we all need to have a life, that is all we want, and that is when Lily said let me out of this car- I do not get why...

She wanted to rest a pace...

27

(A year has passed)

The key was getting what I needed like a potion or a spell-like avail of something to make her love me- I do not see why- she fell out of love with me in the first place. I was the face I could not give her a real family- or her baby- or that what she was letting me think.

So, I can get you back to me, so we can live our life. I looked high; I looked low. I have looked inside, and I have looked outside, I have felt her insides, I have felt around the outside. I have swum in the waters, on the way, I have lived in this car from day to day.

I have fed off the blood of the mobbing wolves, howling at the full moon to trap me, in the woods. I kill them so they will not kill me. All for her!

As you know, I cannot kiss her the way I should stay alive and thrive. If I do not find

this vial soon, I will get so weak I break down to nothing.

Or at least that is how I feel; I am not sure what will happen to me. I am not sure what will happen to her, I must be her hero, I must be!

As I drove as fast as I could, the tires burned the road, and every time the gasoline or tires went out, I just hotwired a car and continued to drive. Nothing was going to stop me. Nothing. After five hours of driving, I finally reached Mount Valhalla.

I sighed in relief and started to climb up the mountain. It is going to be a while before I get there, thank God I am not affected by the high altitude. Thank God, I am a fallen angel. A fallen angel in love.

'This would have been a lot faster if only I had had her broomstick!' I left her in the car in the dark trunk. I have no keys, and that is a good thing, but the doors are unlocked, but there was no choice but to leave her behind like I did before. It is not like I had a donkey to put her and me on to reach the Promised Land. I covered the car with willow branches, alone with her nude torso, at the base of the mountain. 'I am on my way now my love,' I said.' before leaving her. It is like she trembles, for knowing my- absences, or she could see the forthcoming, I ran my fingers through her hair.

Besides, closed the truck with a thud. I knew the only way to get it open would be with pure power in busting the latch. And after... I have this vial! I will be able to rip the car apart with my bare hands! Here we go again, the never-ending climbing battle for love! I hit the lock button on the door knowing that it would not be opened.

28

It always looked easy to climb a mountain, and I used to envy those with the strength to be able to climb a mountain and be just an ordinary person. I sighed and grumbled as I had only been climbing for about five minutes and I was not even close to reaching where I needed to go. I grabbed the next rock and suddenly little pebbles started to fall. 'That isn't a good sign.'

I looked around trying to find another avenue, I could try to get to the point of my destination. I tried to grab another rock and climbed up one until the

rocks holding me up collapsed, and I fell off feeling like I was flying in midair for a few seconds before meeting the ground and feeling agony in my back. 'Freaking!' I screamed in pain. If I cannot enter the mountain by climbing it, I will have to find another entry point. But I am too close to stop now.

29

I am past the point of no return. I must have her love, or I will surely die. I was on the face of the rocks, I had three-points of contact, my hand, one foot, and my left nut. I was just hanging there, could not go up, could not go down. I need a way up there, which is when I feel like a stone, and when my only green vial in my jacket broke, 'Oh Bloody Hell!' I said, somehow, I jumped in time to 2016, everything was so different... a man walked up to me, he had a phone on his wrist, and all kinds of gadgets that I have never seen before, that would beep, ring, and talk. He said- 'Why are you lying on the ground.'

I said- 'I am trying to get to the top.' That is when he said- 'Your dumb butt- take the inclined plane to the top it's only three dollars.' So, like a moron, I get up and walk in line and hand the teenage girl, who runs the ride, my timeworn money.

She looked at me like I was a worm!

That is when I realized the car was gone, and there was a resort at the top of the mountain, and I was all out of green vials. So now what am I going to do?

Now I need to get back to that time, I was in...! And now I need to get the pink and green vial made. But where and how?

Here I am lost, stuck in a time zone that is not ready for me. I looked around me absorbed in my pristine environment and realized I was in a time zone years ahead of me.

I saw a hot blond skinny jogger running past me, and I tapped her on the shoulder. 'Hi, miss, I am a bit lost. Can you tell me what the date is and where exactly I am?' I asked her sweetly. 'Uh, Sir. Did you have a lot to drink last night? What are you wearing?'

She crossed her arm as she looked at me up and down. 'Yeah, I drank a lot of bourbon, and I had a costume party. Could you please let me know where I am and what time I am in?' I asked her about getting impatient. 'Oh- you must have had a lot to drink. You are in California and the year is May 5th, 2016.

Does that help- smart ass?' she asked, looking at me with concern. 'Thanks, miss.' I smiled and walked off. I am in 2016, this is going to take me a while. I just wanted to slap her into last year, she was so belligerent but so good to look at.

She did not even make eye contact with me! I know she was shy but come on, I am not that freaked out in the face! Or is it because guys do not wear capes anymore? I smell bad.

Looking at her like what are those strings hanging out of her short slacks? One is a white braided thing in the front, and the other two soft pink ones by her butt? My God if they get any shorter, she is going to have to powder to more cheeks and cut another head of hair! They do that now, all the time, would that be a good thing? Did I just see her nipples popping out at me too, though her skimpy white top? Damn girls go- and put something on! Global warming must be true? Just look at all these teen girls half-naked. My God- I find myself standing here half-hard, and drilling. Look at that shit around their eyes that is black, they have more eye shadow around their eyes than I do mine.

How can their faces be so gorgeous and flawless? Is what I doing now cheating? God, I need to get back before I nail one of these little girls! Or worse kiss them! Surely if I did that, I would nail my coffin. If I would get caught! Oh, if she finds out! How tempting, this is... I never have seen so many good-looking girls like this. I walk around like a nomad, almost getting run over by all the cars. How things have changed just since the 1990s! It is like being on a different planet if you go back to the 1600s.

30

What- McDonald's what am I doing here- and there everywhere you look? That shit would kill you, but everyone is eating it. Just like what is with all these big ass ladies' doing just walking around in the Walmart at am. Go home! I

have never seen so much Junk in one place! I feel like I am walking around in the twilight zone!

I cannot believe how attracted I was to a girl from another time. A girl who is in another world, who would shit herself, if she knew half of the things about my life. But I would love to bend her over and rip off her shirt...Oh shit! What a freaking thing am I thinking? I am smarter than that to follow my sexual desires. My heart belongs to Lily anyway, we would never see each other again, so it is not worth it. I reassured myself. I needed to find a way out of this world. I looked around me and went down to every bloody shop of a clairvoyant pretending to be one. 'What? Doesn't anyone know honesty and manners anymore? I mean come on!' I growled in frustration and found myself at the last existing 'Witch shop.' I walked in and asked her to tell me what I needed just by touching me.

A middle-aged woman around her twenties touched me, and I finally got the answer wanted. She knew exactly who I was, and what I was doing at that time. She brewed a potion without mentioning a word to me and finally put it in the vial. I swallowed the entire vial and suddenly my world changed all around, and I am back in the other time where I could get that girl to fall for me. Or that was the hope- I sigh in relief and attempt to jump as high as I can to get to the top.

I could not believe what I saw with my eyes. It was a lake full of lava and on the other side, there lay the special potion I so needed. This is going to take

a while. I needed to make a rope bridge, after that thought, I was like something is not right!

I remember I drank blue vial, and it did send me back. But there is one big problem, it turned me into a little green serpent with a cape. Then after a long night of smashing and drinking.

I could see myself in the car paint! Now hopping around, I could see everything, but with like beer goggles on. That is what I got for wanted to be loved one of the girls back there! She read my heart, hands, and thoughts, and must have put that in the mixture. I believed that there would be side effects, but nothing like this... how am I going to get the trunk open now like this, I do not even have any thumbs, I could not jack it... you know even if I wanted too. I knew the only way I would be turned back into me is to kiss the girl that is my true love on the lips. Or at least that is how the story should go.

'I know why she did this... I was cheating in my mind, and she did not like it, all witches stick together, this is payback.' Yet which lips do they mean? What do I kiss the valva or mouth? In my mind I was thinking dirty in the joke, will at least I have the tongue for it? I will have to kiss both sets of lips on her body and see what happens. That is if I can find a way up there! Good thing she has died; I do not think girls like her like kissing serpents! Yet how do I get into this car like this now, and get where I need to go?

So now I need to kiss her, to become a man, and I need to kiss her for her to become alive, and yet I still need to get that pink vial. You know... call me delusional but, who wanted me in her bed, and wanted to play with my broomstick? She was into me, like she knew that I had something she needed. She did not want me to go. She did not want me to kiss Lily, she tricked me. I need to stop trusting random-ass witches! I will be lucky if I do not get warts and knowing me- as they will be on my genitals! At this point, I would just be happy to get my six, and one-half inches back like before. This girl is killing me, but that is love!

31

I fell off a cliff and thudded to the ground. I looked around and found my car. Thank God, she is still in there, I managed to see in through a little rust hole. Then I realized that I cannot open the door because I have no hands. I frowned and shook my head. How was I going to get myself out of this? Then it just hit me, I need to find a lily flower and a four-leaf clover and mix it with some monthly blood of the girl I love, that is the potion I need. I hope that is all right.

Before I kiss her lips, and I become a man! I will do it myself, like always. So, I hopped around and nibbled on a lily that was in the parking lot. I hopped around till nightfall till I found a four-leaf clover. Thankfully, there was a rust hole in the back of the trunk of the car that I slithered into after falling on my ass several times. Anyways, I got the blood I needed when I was liking her up and down. I heard a ticklish giggle.

The blood was old, but it was there deep inside, the taste of it was indescribable, and I kissed both lips in two jumps, now I did not know what was going to happen. I saw what looked like magic dust puffing in the air, yet that was the only light I could see. Something happened it just got cramped in here... but what? I had to go on foot.

32

Holy crap!

I have a- Winky!

I am a man; I am a man...!

I cannot believe it I am a man!

I never knew how nice it was to have to rearrange my nut sack. I have legs, I have arms, and let us not forget about their thumbs! Eyes! Do I have eyes? Please, the sacred voice asking God tells me that I have eyes. I can see! I can see! Holy freaking! And yet again, it is dark in this trunk, so maybe that is it. Here I am cramped in my freaking small truck. God, I feel sorry for anything that I packed here. I am on top of Lily who needs some clothes, but I cannot do that until I get the potion. All this bloody trouble for some freaking resurrection.

I rearrange myself and kick open the trunk with my incredible fallen angel strength, and I jump out feeling a chill in the air. Rain is blistering heavily

towards me and her. I see from my left eye what is left of my trunk, and I frown realizing it.

There is no way I will be able to fix this or put it back on my car. I jumped up high and reached the - position I was in. I found myself in front of a lava pool with very weak and delicate steppingstones. I could see from a distance the beautiful sparkle of the vial I so desperately needed. 'Well, here I go.' I whisper to myself and jump onto the first step, almost falling into the pool. Sunlight could not kill me, but lava would. I jumped again and sighed in relief that I made it. I continue jumping until I am halfway across the pool to the vial. I see it! It is closer.

33

My heart leaped when I saw- that I had done okay with the girls, but I cannot stop now- I want that girl too. Not when she is exposed and easy to get kidnapped. I jumped onto the last step onto the landing. I walk up to the rock holding the vial. 'Only those who have worthy intentions may be allowed to take such a vial.' A voice calls out from a distance. Could it be that I stepped on a vocal recording or is there someone already there watching my every move and ready to take what I so need?

'Who is your daddy!' the voice calls out; I look behind me I see him; with my girl's legs slung... one over each of his shoulders, her hair and head dangling downwards. I thought I killed you, I screamed! 'Son- son- son boy you will never kill me! I am just like you until I get the love I need.

Your daddy thinks it is time for your bedtime story, while I tuck and suck on your girl in me in my bed! What do you think about that?' I said- 'Freaking no you douche-bag!' 'Son- you need to go and suck on some soap, with that dirty mouth of yours! Anyways there is nothing you can do about it.' Now the fighting begins I must push him into this hot stuff, so I can get my hot stuff back.

He had me on the edge, after throwing her to the ground, like she was a rag doll, I knew that something of hers had broken. Yet I had to think about me for the time being. How is it going to be me... or him! Whose love for her is stronger?

34

I am freaking hate this guy. One would imagine the bloody bastard has nine lives, but it is ironic since I have more than just nine lives. He smirks as he watches me figuring out how I was going to stop him for once. But I had the advantage of him, but with the lava, so did he. I jumped, and kicked him in the stomach, watching him fall to the ground with me standing on top of him like a surfboard. He grabs my ankles, and I trip feeling my hair touch a little bit of lava, that was so damn hot, it was like fire in my hair. I yelped and moved away and watched him punch me in the face three times. I could feel my sour blood spill from my mouth until I realized, Blood is my friend. I leap up and grab his neck and lift him choking him out. I walked over and held him over the lava pool.

'Son, let us talk about this, I'm sorry- please don't let go of me!' He begged and I looked over to my Lily, and I thought about how he wanted to sexually assault her like he sexually assaulted my mother.

He was the one man who could make me regret having him as my father. I dropped him, and he screams as he falls into the lava. I sped away from the lava and watched it consume him whole. I turned around and picked up my vial and poured it down Lily's porthole to the soul. I understood something clearly at last of her soul start to brighten as her skin color became white once again. She opened her eyes and saw me. She jumped and moved away.

'Lily. It is me. It is Christer- Edward.

35

Do you remember me?'

I crawled towards her, and she looked down screaming, even more, covering the private parts of her body. Her first words she said snakingly- 'Way, am I na-naked?'

Then she proceeded to say freaking out. 'Do you see all this come and blood dripping out of me? Like you could have shot it in my face for all I care, not deep inside me!' she asked me- 'Did you do this to me?' I just looked at her in awe! She kept running at the mouth- 'If you did... you know that I'm not on the pill!' I just looked dumbfounded thinking all girls or on that shit at least they are now.

'You know this right?' I said 'No.' What, you are going to have a fat pregnant wife.'

'Yes, know when a girl is pissed when she starts moving her hands around like Beyoncé!'

Now in my mind, I was thinking this question- 'Is she, or isn't she? Or worse who is the daddy?' I was hoping it would all drip out. (Dr-ip! Drip!) And it would not be he is a seed that impregnates her. That is when I thought there must be a virgin vial also? Just like there is a pill to stop her from getting pregnant. But do I need to stop it... would this baby be mine? Or would I kill my baby? Or would I be killing his?

There must be something, I can do before she rips my dick off, and slaps me up with it! But what...?

I knew I had to ask the question which would change my life. 'Is the baby mine?' She lifted her shoulders in question. 'I don't think so.' My heart raced, feeling more rage than ever. He is dead and yet he still torments me. 'Is it my father?

You do not need to ever worry about him anymore. He has gone out of our lives forever.' I grabbed her wrists and she quickly moved away and started jumping on the steppingstones. 'Lily?' I asked in concern and followed her. 'No! Leave me alone! I do not know who you are! You are so not the man I thought you were.' She continued to get further away from me. I wonder how long it will take for her to realize she has no idea where she is.

This is horrifying to me, but I could see that baby coming out looking like my dad, or even being my dad oddly enough, like being born again out of her. Just popping slightly out... 'Looking like Achmed the Dead Terrorist!'

Then something inside me just snapped. (One eye twitched twice.) 'I am done; I am just done fighting for her.' I thought- 'There comes a time where every man reaches his breaking point. And mine was when she thought I would do that to her or let him have his way. She holds me responsible, regardless? Like I was deviant demonic sick-o.' (There comes a time when you must let her go.) If she wants me, she will come back to me... right? Naturally, I left her to walk off into the sunset, but cheeks wiggling away.

(Am I going to regret it?)

I do not know yet. So... I am thinking about her already. In nine months, I will know if I am a daddy or not. Even though she thinks... I have no way of truly knowing. She is going by feel and that is not always right. She will be back if she loves me! That is not if the mob of wolves do not find her and the baby first. And do what I said they would. But I am just DONE! I wonder where she is going to go now. I wonder what I am going to do without her now.

She is naked running across a pond of lava, who is already four weeks pregnant. She is my love navigating a world that has moved on from her death. I could not just leave her. 'Perhaps I could watch her from a distance and protect her when she needs it. I thought. I saw that she had finally reached the other side and I

continued to follow her. 'I don't trust you, but where the freaking am I?' Lily covered her boobs and vagina- sheepishly...

'Look at least let me drive you back to your hometown, and you can get some clothes. Here- take my jacket...' I gave her my jacket and she took it. 'TURN AROUND!' She screamed, and I turned around when I did not, and she put the jacket on, and I spun around and led her to my truck. 'What do you remember...?' I asked trying to have a conversation. 'Nothing, I can't remember anything...' She sat hunched overlooking out the window, fogging it up with her breath. I put on the heater and heat started to come out through the vents. She screamed until she inspected the vents closer. 'Why do you drive so fast?' 'It's Just a fallen angel thing,' I said.

'What is it?' she asked dumbfounded. Looked at her and it just hit me, she is not a fallen angel or a witch, she is just a teen girl that got her life back that is why she left me.

After all this- she is just the way she was before all this took place. I went along with it.

'It is not all just stifling air coming out. Even if we do not breathe- It helps in keeping bodies like ours warm, to feel loved- do you like it, this feeling?'

I replied keeping my eyes on the road. 'It burns my skin.' She looked at me. 'Yes, that happens when your skin is cold. But do not worry, it will not hurt

you unless it is on higher.' I smiled. Knowing that it was frostbite. 'I believe you.'

She smiled with a sparkle in her eye.

'You do remember me, don't you?' I smiled some... 'How could I ever forget the love of my life? He spoke.

I love you Christer.

And I am pregnant, I created a potion to prevent myself from getting pregnant by your father before raped me.

I remembered what you said to me. So, I am fine and thank you for bringing me back to life. So instead of going back there, why do not we go and explore the world like France and get me some clothes.' She chuckled and held my hand. I laughed and we both listened to old music as we rode into the sunlight.

Nine months later a new fallen angel baby was born. A little girl that was all ours, we named Faith. We both reached the successful conclusions that we want so badly, and found love within love, by having something and someone to love more than life itself. Turns out it was my lovely baby after all- I got everything I ever wanted- and we lived happily ever after.

Sins of the Fallen Angel: Part: 2

Chapter: 1

The first time, now here I am gasping for air, I just got kissed; kissed by death- like sin and the lust. Nothing could ever stop me from dying... Or could it? I was too blind to realize that hope could free me from this. From this everlasting darkness and everlasting torment. But here I am stuck in a wooden box with a ton of dirt surrounding me. I am just an ordinary girl. 'Why would anyone want to put me into this box? It is not just a box, I am underground.' I thought. Was anyone out there trying to find me? I asked myself. I did not want to die like this, at least not for this why. I punched the wooden ceiling, I had it above me. It made no difference.

'Damn it!' I growl and rub my sore fist. The pain my fist was feeling did not matter. The worst pain was coming from within. If I had one wish while in this freaking situation, what would it be? I forced my mind to think, and I wiped away all the tears coming from my eyes. 'Is it so hard to think of the one last thing that I want? Is there nothing that I ever wanted that badly? Was there never really any purpose in my life? And right now, should I be sad about the fact that my life will end as soon as the oxygen in this box runs out... or about the heart-wrenching realization that I have been living a life which had no purpose of its own?'

Well, that is not true; it is just a warning bell ringing aloud. My life is not ending at all. This all has been an engagement orchestrated, just to get me to wake the freak up, and bring me closer to a purpose. I do not know what that would be. However, something which binds me to some other being, or some other force

which would lead me to a place where at least I could find peace before I take my last breath. And become exposed no longer. Unnati⁵⁸I had only one thought. 'Get out of here before you die. I punched and punched so hard. My hand became swollen and bloody. Dirt was coming in like a river pouring into a shallow area. 'I must get out. I must get out. I must get out' I climbed and dug through the dirt before my hand could something. It is air. I could feel the air. I continued digging with my eyes closed and I finally stuck my head out into the air. I looked at my surroundings. I am back. I am back in the 1690s. I must hide before they suspect me once again.

Chapter: 2

My breath quickens faster, faster, and faster as I think about the world around me.

Thinking about how I used to glance up at the brightening expanse of the sky, I bit my lip. I could see slivers of light within the box's boards. That is when I knew that I was not covered completely yet with the earth above me. That dawn was showing me the light looking at the patches of growing crops, I realized that farmers would be out soon. I kicked and kicked until my feet were cut, but I did it. I got out, nevertheless, I had to hurry. 'Hey! Who is there?' A farmer calls out. I gasp in fear of being noticed and run more. I find a church nearby and hide behind it. As I ran towards the church, I decided to go inside, and let the doors close behind me; so that the farmer could not get to me. I ran like I never ran before! I realized it has

been really- long since I have been to a church. My mother's resentful words started ringing in my ears. 'One day you will see. It will be the only place you will have left to go to. You need to be saved, yet you will never be if you do not want to be. Do you see...? You say you do not believe in Him. Oh, that day is on its way, you will have no one to help you and you will feel the wrath. You will see. The time will come.' Though I am still not a believer it is funny. A practical joke that life has played on me. Hell, like it was wished on me. At last, here I am, where I thought I would never be. As I hobbled inside, I was astonished by what I saw. I could not believe my eyes. Could this be? No? Yes? It was... or am I hallucinating? At this point in my mind, I was too damn to try to differentiate between what is real, and what was unreal. Nevertheless, I see what I never believed in.

I walk to the front of the altar he looks up from the book which he was reading. It is not a Bible. I was sure I knew him he gave me his seed which made my life. It looks like an old book on philosophy. 'How did you get here?' He smiles then closes the book. 'You weren't hard to find.' He stands from the pew he was at and gives me a once over. 'It's a good look for you.' 'What? Dirt and near-death?' He smiles again. The wrinkles around his eyes crinkle slightly and the light catches his salt and pepper slicked-back hair. 'No. Survival.' I do not know how long I was out there. It could have been a day; it could have been weeks. I do not know... I am so confused. 'You look good for a young girl that has been rolling around in the dirt.'

'Heh- thanks... I guess.' I chuckled and looked at him. 'I must ask you something. I saw you back when they pushed me into the cold hard ground and buried me, you were there in the crowd. Why did you let them bury me? I am your daughter and yet you treat me like a stranger.' He kept on smirking at me with that sideways smile. I yelled, "would you stop looking at me like that. It is starting to freak me out. So freak'n creepy! 'You wanted me to stay out of your life. That was one way that you would be gone, I knew you would come crawling back, you always come back... like the little girl that you are, but this time was the longest you have been gone. It has been a long time.' He rubs his hands over the book and sighs. 'But I guess if you genuinely want me to, I'll get more involved from now on.' I frown- like do not bother yourself. 'That didn't answer my question.' He smiles again. Even creepier than before. I thought his fake teeth were going to the poop of the smile was that wide. His eyes narrowed at me. 'Yes, I was in the crowd.' My dad raises his old, wrinkled hand to keep me from speaking 'Do you not ever freak'n interrupt me. If I had interfered, they would have killed me. Then who would keep an eye on you?' I can feel my anger rise. 'Someone who lets me get buried alive... how can you say that?' 'Yes, I had too I did not have a fucking choice! Okay!' I said- 'I just wanted you to give me some space, but you are meant to protect me and look after me. It sounds to me that you wanted me to be gone.' I felt my eyes knowing they were getting teary, so I wiped away my tears before he could see my cry, like the little child he thinks I am. How did I get this why? It was slowly coming back to me.

Chapter: 3

Even so, what he does not know is that I had someone. Yes, someone that loved me more than he ever could or would, that was everything to me. However, just like my dad, he was killing me from killing me in so many ways. Killing me slowly, mentally, physically, spiritually. It is like he holds in my breath, and I can let him out. I know the closer he gets to me, the closer he gets to kill me with his lusting voluptuous kiss. But I want it! I want to feel it! You are slowly sucking the life out of me anyway. I know you cannot help it like I cannot help loving you. That fine with me I guess, but we have not even made out yet! Or did we? 'If I have to die to have your love then so be it!' That is what I said to him. 'Just kiss me... I cannot take not having you in my life. And if my life ends then we can live forever, together if there is an afterlife, only if that is if you choose to die for me too. As I will for you.' So, what do you want to do? To kiss or not to kiss, that is the question! I said that I do not want you in my life, just I said to my dad. Why must I push everyone away? Nevertheless, which is just a lie. 'I want you! I must have you.' Is what I said.

Christer-James- 'I need you; I must have you! All of you! I must taste the kiss you want to give to me. Till death do we part, with all my heart, crossed and hope to die in your arms? I know that making love to you would rip us apart.'

I recall whispering back in his cold ear- 'It is this love you would give me that would go right through me, as we would get ever so closer to eternal love. I

want it! Do you want me? Death is the passion, I am longing for so kiss me now, and I will be forever yours! And you will be forever mine.'

The last time... I was in the church, and I confessed my love for you. Beforehand asking if I would be forgiven, for my wrongs, even if I do not have complete faith I thought. I assumed what do I have to lose- I will try. I will get into the dress and confess everything to you. In-front of the man of God. I said 'I do's,' and so did you. I knew that it was wrong. I knew that I was too young, so young that I am not sure if I knew what love is or what it entailed. Nevertheless, I said 'Let us do this, let us go all the way, and never look back, let us make the earth move tonight, I want to feel your breath on my young alive skin, I want to feel what it would be like when you are killing me with that kiss, as you take me for your lover now and forever. I want to be deflowered, as you place a flower on my grave and follow me to the promised land. Come and hold my hand.' That is what I said. I breathed so deeply knowing that today would be my last breath of all.'

Chapter: 4

The wedding night: I remember standing there unclothed- I quivered, I trembled, and I felt my knees knocking together. I could see him walking towards me. Oh yes, looking stronger and mightier than ever before. His manliness was just thumping in-front of me. I did not even know that was possible. Yet again- I am only fifteen years old.

My thoughts- I am so hoping that I am not making a big mistake, eager that your love for me is not fake. I do not want to be used and left for dead like men such as yourself have done to me in the past. Everything I know and love in my life, I must forsake just to have you.

Then I thought- Even if he does not love me, I know that I will never get away. He will always be looking over me, even if we do not end up together forever. Even if he does not absolutely love me, as I do him... Somehow, I know that I will never get away from his charm, never-ever be able to run away from his stony- yet glittery eyes, that make me weak and lustful. He will always be looking over me, even if we do not end up together for always. I will always feel him inside me! Feeling all that is him running through my veins and driving me to complete madness. Just like the poison of that first kiss. The kiss at the altar, and now the sucking kiss we are sharing during this lovemaking. He is coming into my bloodstream. I feel me pouring the toxins out my most erotic pulsating girly parts of my body. We will be bonded for life, and the lives that come after. We will be like one being or so that was dreaming.

There is no escaping it now... nor do I want too. I just want it to keep on coming, it feels that good. Oh- what he is doing to me. It is ripping through me... but I love it. It is like spraying like pouring rain and it is mixing with mud on the ground under my feet. Plus, I am drizzling with his poison all over my chest, face, and my girly opening, it is all coming out of me too, like a river of love. It must be

the best feeling in this world. Yes, I am spraying the wetness, it is dripping like my eyes when he was not near me all the time in the days of the past. And when he is not near me, he creeps in my mind when he is gone. He plays with my feelings- I know this. The same way he likes to play with me in his cold candlelight bedroom.

He builds me up so far and stops, and then when he comes for me to come with him, it is even stronger, just like I come twice as hard for him. It is the same way. Just like the candle that he blows out with his expired breath, he blows me to a place I never been to. As he crawls beside me, he blows that same icy breath on me, as he covers me with kisses, all over my little body. It is our first night sleeping together. It must be romantic! His eyes glow like the full yellow moon at midnight, which I see from the cracked glass windows that rattle as the wind gusts through the maple trees.

As I lay my tiny head on his motionless chest, I am naked and carefree and fall asleep on top of his chilly torso, I feel that rigid body that never needs rest at all. Everything is eerily perfect... naturally, I look forward to the dawn of daylight. In a way, I do not care if I wake up! Yes, it was just that good! Yet I must wonder what if...

Chapter: 5

Will I understand something clearly at the end of the fire down below? Or will I become exposed, everything is black I do not know... Either way, I am contented just being in the arms of my love for this night. Is it black because there

is no light in the room? Or is it black because I am dying? Is this death? If so, I did not see it be like this at all. Where am I now? I slowly open my eyes... I am not sure if I see anything. I feel fucked up in the head. Like I had the shit banged out of me. Which is possible... It happened.

Am I died or alive?

Am I alive or dead?

Is he dying with me or not?

Why am I not feeling his touch?

Am I bleeding too much?

Should I be feeling something?

I feel the air getting bleak, am I even breathing I cannot tell at this point? I never felt so alive even if this is the death, I never been so thrilled to death in my life. 'We should see the gates by morning. We should be inside in the evening.' The kiss was everything, all that I was hoping for and more, but it is this darkness that is all that is around me now or something more.

~*~

(In the coffin)

I am just dreaming about this?

Is this happening to me?

Am I seeming people, seeing me go down?

Am I not seeing him going down with me?

Do I feel the ground encasing me?

That is when I realized I was in this wooden coffin. Was I covered over last night with the earth above? At that time, I did not know. Was I dressed in a lacey nightgown and nothing else, I was panties-less, limp, and almost motionless with a red rose on my chest? I could smell the faint scent; it was from the wedding bouquets. Was there no one there to see me other than him when I was lowered down in these six-foot holes? Was he the one that placed this flower on me, or was it someone else?

I want to know what happened.

Did anything happen?

I will I had been my thoughts talking to me, and they were deafening. I evoke hearing every one of those nine-inch nail being hammered in my coffin, which sealed my fate. Yet was it the kiss that killed me? Was it more than a kiss? Why was I put on the ground?

If so, was I still so much alive?

Is it because of who I am?

I cannot die... or am I?

I am so confused!

What happened to me last night? I can pound on this wood till my fist is blood-spattered, or is that blood or embalming fluid? That is why I have slashes on my feet. I was drained of all my blood.

Can anyone hear me?

'Hello! Anybody out there- I need help!' The cemetery is still, with only creepy hunting sounds, which I make up in my mind in fear. I am calling out for help, nonetheless, the skeletons next to me in their timeworn boxes in this old cemetery are not answering me anytime soon. It seems that the only memo I am getting out to the folks that walk on top of me is what is printed on my headstone. And that is not much of anything for a girl my age, I never did anything spectacular. So, all that is printed in my name, date of my birth, and the date of my death.

Will I be saved, or was I?

Why am I so muddled?

Chapter: 6

I am riddled with fear. I have no idea how long I was down there. I was only buried alive, and my father could care less about me. Yet I was not surpassed.

So, I ran away from him. I could not bear to look at his face once again. As I ran into the woods, something occurred to me. I have nowhere to go. No family that wanted me, no friends. Nothing, but everyone in town believing that I was a witch. They only believed I was a witch, and a murderer because, I was found standing over a nine-year-old dead girl's body her name was Loretta, and immediately they made their assumptions. So, I had to run and never be found, otherwise, I knew I would be dead, or sent somewhere to be put to death. I heard the town's folks saying, as I ran past like a mad girl, that they were going to throw me into the river. And if I did not drown, then I am truly a witch. Either way, I would be dead. I knew I had to make a new life for myself. But- how, and where?

Christer-James- Affirmative, I killed her I did not want to do it. But I had other reasons for doing it. Yes, other than them saying- I had too. Yet it was the only way I could be with her, being like this is not what I wanted. I did not want to suck the life out of her, I have been dyeing myself for over a hundred years now, and I have been with a lot of girls, nevertheless, they were not like her. None of them have been as good as she was, she had me coming back for increasingly. She needs me to come as I need her to come to me. Who I am? Well, you mere mortals? Can you call me by my current name- Chris- James Damsel? This is true that I wanted to marry for the last time. No- I did not want to suck her blood, I said that I would stop doing this, but it is like sex ones you do it with a virgin, you want to keep having it increasingly and you have a bond to them. I remember my first time. That was oh so long ago....

With her, I could not help myself. She was so young and lovely, so tight and fit. I loved her ways, and her voice, and her little smile, she was everything I ever dreamed of before I became this. I am not one of those types. I feed off the kiss and stop before going all the way, I have had many young girls, and have taken a lot of them. In my lifespan I had many young girls like her fallen in love with me, and why not I am their fantasy man.

Yet I am not Edward Cullen, yet I am the next best thing. They just cannot help it... I do absolutely love her; I want to stop doing this. I want her to be the last girl I am with... can a fallen angel be with a girl that was alive, that he killed in a night of passion, for being what everyone thinks is a witch because of it also? Should I bring her back to life, and dig her back up to be a monster like myself? Should I save her and save her? We would be perfect together with a witch and a fallen angel, it could be a happy ever after for both of us. I know this will piss off a lot of people out there if I do this, yet that is half the fun. Come to my surprise, I went to the grave and she was gone... Where did my love go? Come out, come out wherever you are! Oh, I see that you want to play a little game with me. Okay, I guess I must find you, my one-day-old bride. I cover my eyes and count to ten...

I am on my way my darling!

'Yes, I ran from him as I ran from all of them, was he any different, I did not know. I was just like my dad in every way, I fear this fact. But my dad did not

want to kill me, or did he? Christer-James did not want to either, or did he? Even now I want to be killed over and over by his kiss... if that is how it needs to be. I still love him. Like I still love my dad. Even if he is an asshole.

Chapter: 7

She is gone, but she is everywhere. In the air. In the soil. But she taunts me. But I smell her. She is close. Nearby. I hide behind trees and run. In a further distance, there she is gasping for air. She knows I am close; I always seem to know when she was getting close, and I can feel her heartbeat faster than ever. Just like it was when I was about to kiss her. I ran and pounced on top of her. I watched her fall onto the ground with me on top. Yet it was not her at all, it was some random dead girl, who looked to be the age of ten or so. I got off this poor girl and was horrified. So, I ran, looking for her once more. I hope that this will not be the result again.

When I found her- she was sitting on what I thought was a rope tree swing, all alone in the thick fog she was naked. 'No- No- No!' I screamed. She was hanging in the air. I was wondering also if I went too far, and I did. That was not her heart beating at all, not... it was the leftover blood and embossing fluid dripping from her gashed feet. It was the sound of dripping on the ground, I could see this trill also from when she was running. I am relieved that the hunger wolves did not descend on her. There is my love hanging from a nose, she knew they would find her. I know she was not afraid of me doing this. I guess she could not stand being

without me. However, should I bring her to life once more, so she can truly become like me and never die? Should I, do it? Should I kiss her again to bring her back to life? Why did she do this? Or did she? It was the angry mob- I call them wolves, with their flaming torches, swords, and pitchforks from the village, which strung her up as she was running from them; for me to find because I did not do the job, they asked me to do. I guess killing her the way I did was not good enough!

But soon I realized... I am cursed. My lips, my kisses, they are venomous as much as they are sexual, unfortunately. I kiss her and I risk killing her more. But I must free my love for my love to be with thee. I climbed the tree with more of a struggle than I thought was possible. How do people manage to climb trees, and make it look so damn easy? I thought. She is naked. She is getting colder. I looked in my pocket and in it, I was lucky enough to have my trusty knife and cut the rope. My love- Gracie she fell to the ground, and that is when I thought I heard her make a slight gasp for air.

Did I just hear that?

Or was there someone there?

Naturally, I cut the rope, and she flopped around like a dead fish in the mud on the ground below. Then I climbed the tree once more, with her in my one arm, I did hear someone, and it was more than one. The mob of wolves is not all around the tree, pocking us with their sharp weapons. I hope they give up soon... or before they think about lighting us up. Me being the man that I am... I saw that my

girl is getting and let to hair and dirty for my liking. I could not let her be like this. So, I am going to have to find a river, or something and bathe her! Before I want to give that long kiss. I men every guy wants a clean girl to French. No- I do not care if she is naked when I kiss her... just if she has slickly smooth skin. It would be more romantic!

Hum- they must have tried to grab her by that night, I put her in when she sprinted. Finally, the mob gave up after an exceptionally long night of us sitting out on a limb high up in that tall old tree. They went back home to their families, yet I knew they would be back soon enough. Like really get a life... I walked and walked, tripping over logs and sticks in these dark and unsympathetic woods. Just holding her in my arms. Almost like a baby in the arms of her daddy. I found the river I was looking for, after walking for an exceptionally long time. Nevertheless, I ran to it. I placed her down, and then I got nude also, and I walked into the soft movie water in the moonlight, with her in my arms. Then I kissed her forehead... saying-' I will bring you back to me... I will- my love.'

The river was cold but refreshing. I got the mud out and off her face, and I splashed the water all over her and rubbed her skin with my hands, I washed her long hair, and brushed it out with my fingers. I had my sharp knife with me in my hand, and I shaved my girl I did her underarms, legs, and vagina. As well as I could, I know that she would want me to do that, she is a girl. And I am her man and let us not forget I am her husband. I have a right to do this.

Plus, now it is the way I want her to be, I look at her, she is so sweet, even like this limp and not moving. She is perfect... She is completely faultless to these old eyes, as I lay her in the grass to dry off. I got down, and I lay next to her bare also. I look up at the billions of stars over us, wishing that they were alive, so we could just hold each other, at this very moment. Looking over the water, with the moon setting with it glowing on the reflection ripples. I lay my head on her chest on top of her nipples, but there is no sound coming into her torso, all I can hear is the river splashing. It saddens me at these most perfect of moments.

If only I could have the power to bring her to life. I cried as her limp lifeless body lay on my lap. Even as she is dead, her hair shines in the moonlight. It just glimmers like the stars shining endlessly. Gracie was my heart and my soul and yet she has been taken from me. A piece of me was taken and could never be restored as her soul would never come back. I look at the dark sky with its bright full moon. If only there was a shooting star. But that's only superstitions. I remember my father talking about it as if it were witchcraft and to never believed in it or mentioned it. That talk was the only time that we had a good moment. There were few I can assure you. But I am alone, dripping wet and cold. I know that the mob would not stop and search for me. The mob of wolves would continue to hunt me down in the daylight. I am suddenly getting hungry, and Gracie was only going to slow me down. Then the thought occurred to me, how did the mob know where to find me, and that I was still alive too, I was meant to go down with her. Who betrayed me? Was it my unloving father or the girl I loved too much? I knew I had

to keep going or I was going to join her. I did not want to die. I am only eighteen, or so that is what everyone thinks. Even so, I am too young to die, and I know my future will be big. I must continue to run also, hiding and leaving the girl I loved too much in random spots. I know I will return to her one day. 'Goodbye, my love. May we see each other once again?'

Chapter: 8

I needed to kill my father to bring her back to life, he is the one that started all this. Yet I swear that I would never take another life and kissing your dad on the lips like that to me is wrong. Yet it is worth thinking about. I chopped down several logs with my knife and rock, and made a lean-to shelter for her, I placed flowers that I picked around her now frosty body as a memorial. I had to leave her behind, it was the hardest thing I ever had to do! I just want to give up and stay there with her. Yet I knew I had to go, but not for long, I would be back for her. When I had the right spill, love potion, or a night with a shooting star. I had to find someone to help me with this rejuvenation or my love.

I did not know if it was like a dance, which I needed to do or a chant, or what. I just did not know. I was clueless as to what it would take to get your back. Who do I see about this without them thinking that I am completely crazy? Besides, would it be wrong for me to want to bring her back to life? She is the dyed girl I love, that is resting at pace now.

Treasured in my heart you will stay until we meet again someday. Death is the last chapter in time, but the first chapter in eternity. But my biggest question is will I see you there if I fail at this like my dad said I failed at everything I ever tried? God- I love to hate that man! He did nothing but abuse me. And as soon as I do, I find love... I must lose it. Is it because of him? Why- I ask? Why me... have not I been through enough pain? I remember one of my punishments as a kid was getting locked into splintered wood head and hand locking gates, and the town would walk by spitting on me, throwing stones, my dad told everyone that I was touching myself, because I could not get a girl to have sex with me or get a date, and that was a forbidden at the time. And doing that was considered a crime. He chased them all away- it was him, not me, which was the issue!

She was the only real love I ever had...!

I recall my bastard of a father even tried to do it with my girl, asking her to get down on her knees, the night I brought her home. I felt bad for him I let him move in here. He tried to get her to make him happy. He even touches her the same way that I have seen him touch my mother, it made me sick. I stopped him before she had to take it all down. He was falling drunk. That is why my mother let him, all those years ago. He would tie her down to the bed, and do it so many times, and shove it in so hard that she bloods out for days after. That is how I was made, he raped and sodomized her every night in ways you cannot even image, or do not want too. Now he wants to do the same with her, no it is not happening. I will not

let it. I would never look at a broom the same way. When she was fourteen, she got pregnant, and in those days, you had to marry the father of your baby.

She said that if she got away, she would never come back, not even for me. Father blames me for her leaving, plus he did not have anyone to bang or bang around anymore, so he took it all out on me. If my mother were alive today, she would be 264 years older than me. She passed by giving birth to her second baby named Ashlyn. Mother, she bled to death from tearing and ripping when she pushed her out. Ashlyn was born in the early 1700s and dyed at the age of six, from drowning in the wash tube. I never met her... and heard it in the late 1900s and I am still alive. Sometimes I lose track of time and dates.

On the other hand, my wife was born in 1999, and she passed on that year. Good God how things have changed all these many years. I worked for the Ford Motor company in 1909, I saw the first model- T drive away. I have seen it all... I remember the Titanic making the papers, as the ship that was sinkable. I have seen all the wars, I have even been in WW2, and was shot in the head. Yet I will not die... I just stay the same age as 18. I have graduated from high school six times, in different towns... Hell back in the early day's us boys dropped out in sixth grade, to work in the coal mines, I recall my lunch bucket scraping on the railroad tracks as I walk in the dark to work as a little one.

Yeah, I have been to school many times just so I would fit in. I have seen a lot of people die. I wonder what complete death is like... I would not know;

I was kissed by death by a ten-year-old named Julianna she was the daughter of a nurse... I do not know why she picked me. She became my first love in my life, and she reminds me so much of Gracie, anyways she was a fallen angel, so was her mom... I was deathly sick with pneumonia, in the hospital and she kissed me on the lips and that was it I was 18 forever. She was my girl until my dad had her killed, with a wooden stake through the heart. I do not know if he gave the order... yet I blame him for her death too. I have no clue how he knew that she was a fallen angel, other then the sparkle of her big blue-green eyes.

I have seen a lot of babies being born too. I became a doctor in that field, helping with childbirth, I made a promise to my mother that no girl under my care would die the way she did, legs open, vagina ripped to her butt, only to die on the cold table, with no one caring, as the placenta is ripped out and thrown to the floor as the baby cries, for a mother that is never going to be there for her. Yes, and the only reason, I must put up with my perverted dad, is that I know that he forced a sucking kiss on Ashlyn a day before her death. So, I am not sure, he is not going to be leaving me anytime soon. Oh, and the only way I thought I could die, is if Gracie and I kissed for so long that we both suck the life out of each other, or she ran a stake in my chest. Yet that is just mythology to me. All these many years I never asked how to die or how to live, or how to get someone back. I wish I did, so she can live... I do not know I never asked, how this all works, it is not like today's books have it right.

Yet I want to live life with her. But what can I do? She is dead... So, saying that Gracie was the only love I had, was not so... she is the one I chooses to live the rest of my days with now, just like all the other girls, when I had them in my life. I have a love for them all, and it never- ever lasted yet never- ever dies, even if they do. I do not think I am meant to have love, make love, or be loved.

To some love is a kiss goodnight, a kiss on the forehead, a kiss while having sex. To some love is kissing at a wedding, kissing in the rain. It goes on and on. To some love is having babies, something I will never have just like I will never grow old with my lover. To some love is a state of mind that cannot be controlled. Oh, how I know this more than most, in this hellish world we call home. To most love is just screwing nowadays that is just how it is. To me, love and kissing is a death sentence. No not for me... only for the girl that I love. They can live on resting in peace, yet here I am sullen. Why? Why must I be angry... like this? I cannot blame God; he is not the one that did this to me. It is so hard to live with something you cannot ever- never have or get back. I do not have an answer for it or a cure.

Yet! I just must live on without them, and mostly her and deal with it... as the town's people would say. Even so... did I do anything wrong? I do not think so... do you? Am I to blame for whom I became? Was it my feeling to be picked for this? I love to death! I even love them after their death. I love them even more

than the taste of their blood dripping in my mouth when I kiss them with my passion. I mean you must kiss your love to show that you love her... right?

There are so many myths about me. Like I do not feel pain, that I am cold and heartless. No- I feel pain, I feel so much pain for myself, for her, for them, and even for you. Its people like you and them that have ripped my heart out by trying to stab me with their wooden stakes. We do not need to die like that, we want to understand something clearly at last just like anyone else. Oh, and yes, I have a bed in my room even though I do not need to sleep. Coffins give me the creeps! I have seen too many in my life, I do not want to sleep in one, because of that. I can be as warm as the next guy, more than him. I am warm not in body but in my personality. I am not a stocker, I do not try to be a player, and I do not try to be a bad boy. If a girl wants me, then she can come to me, and if she falls in love with me, I do not force her to stay; knowing the circumstances; it is her option to kiss me, and to be my girl. She can be with me in my broken heart forever! One way or the other.

Chapter: 9

I still could not fathom how the mob discovered my immortal gift. It was heartbreaking to see such people I used to know, and love turned on me so greatly. I am immortal. They fear me and yet they used to know me. They were my friends, family, everything I used to know and yet they feared me. They have the intent to kill because they fear what they do not understand. I lived too long to see how

humanity works. I was born in 1672, and yet I know the future. What if I was not just immortal? What if I was god's vessel to this world? Has God given me the knowledge of the future that has yet to come? It is the 1990s as of now, a deadly era that punishes those for being different.

Religion comes into their lives every day and I am not their friend. I am different and that sentences me to death. I cannot stay here anymore. I had a shitty childhood that ruined me. My father turned from me, took my girlfriend's virginity, and made her his sex slave. But no more shall he live. No more shall he punish me for existing. He is a lazy bastard that needs a good punishment and good ass-kicking as well. I ran out of the woods where I had spent many nights, I hid behind my home, the house I once lived in with my love and my dad. I cannot believe this new perspective; I see things in a whole new light. This was never my home. It died when my mother died and was murdered even beyond when Gracie dead.

Death is near, I can smell it! Now it is time for me to do, what I should have done years ago, when he bent my mother over, and suck it in my butt hole. Just the way he does with all of us. I am going to cut that thing off, so he bleeds out slowly, and dies the way he should. That way he can think about what he has done to all of us and are holes. I am going to make a hole where his dick should be and see how he likes it. Indeed, it is safe to say that I have snapped, and it was love that made me crazy. I will throw it in the river, so the fish have something to nibble on.

Yes- he has fucked the shit out of her, just like he did with my mother and all the girls that were in my life. I can still hear all the sounds of ripping, blood dripping, he got his red wings every time, when he jammed it into her. The girl's every time there is calling out my name. However, he had me tied up or under his spell or something... it was like I was in a dream! I was so weak and could not come to their aid. It was the same way when I was a boy, I never remember what happened. Yet I could feel it afterward. To me, it does not matter if it is the 1690 or the 1990's having oral sex then missionary sex, or ass- over, and she says no, it means no... Do not do it. Yet he never got that, now it is time for me to get my revenge! But I could not stop him, so I am going to make sure he never penetrates another child if I live. I just do not know why I did not think about this sooner.

Yes, I did it! I cut the dangly thing off. He enjoyed it the sick twisted ass hole. I got to him when he was resting in his bed, he looked up and gave me shit. So, I cut him off, by cutting him up, down there! Now with my father out of the way and depriving me of his company. Now I can get back to my lovely love, which was left behind, to see if this worked. Before I do that- I must let some of that red stuff come out, from his makeshift spout into a jar. It is what I need to pour in her to bring her back to life. Yes- I asked someone who knows more about this than me.

Before, I came back home. I went to see a fortuneteller, and she said- 'That to bring her back to life, I had to take the life of who damned her soul and

took her virginity. She added- Make the gash from the spot where the unjustness took place. Take his blood and pour it into her porthole to her soul, known as her vagina, and it should bring her back to you as she was. When you kiss her while making sweet and passionate love to her mix this in with your fluids.' I was never ever so grossed out in all my days. But I would do anything for her, I mean anything. Yet she was not 100% sure it would work, and I was not sure if I want to have sex with my dead wife. Plus pouring my father's blood in there and mixing it all up in there on top of it all with mine. That is so freak'n nasty! There are so many wrongs here, it must be right.

On top of that, I was not the one taking her virginity, as I should. Hell- all I was getting his leftovers, again I might add, I feel cheated like always. It is like I am eating out his leftovers too and can taste it. God- that is vile! No matter how many times you bathe a girl, you cannot help but think someone else has been in there, and that is just not cool! Call me old-school but a girl should only have one lover in a lifetime, and that love with her should have been me. However not even this can stop me from absolutely loving her... I will try anything at this point. Who knew she might just get pregnant? That is the hope in my heart that she and I have a baby. If it is possible... for us, and if everyone would back off, and let it happen.

I know the mob of wolves would see her big pregnant belly, they would hold her down and cut her open and rip my baby out. Like a helpless little girl... they would kill her. I could see it now, them sticking her... ending it all before it

starts. I can see her small nude body with the cord attached... go limp, and I would lose yet another love of my life. I do not know if I could take seeing that.

My life just keeps getting increasingly disturbing, but so real. Really- it has always been this way, all the way back to that day, that I become one of these fallen angels.

Chapter: 10

So, I just keep on running, running, and running! She is gone...! There is nothing worse than waiting and not knowing what will happen. Your imagination can be crueler than any kidnaper. Who would take her from her resting place? I must find her. I just hope that the mob did not burn her body, if they did nothing, they would ever bring her back to me. I will never- ever stop loving her! I will look for her until I cannot look anymore.

I am haunted. Haunted by all my dark childhood. I have been cheated out of having a good life. I had a bastard of a father. I had my mother's life ripped out of my life. I had my one true love stolen from me, and yet her soul has not been strong enough to fight death. Death is all around me. I have been kissed by death and it still was not enough to comprehend. I came back vigorously, and love that would never die. Here I stand in the middle of the lagoon covered with long grass, a pretty lake that glimmers in the sun. I felt empty. The mob of wolves stole her from me once again. I ran towards a small house in the woods and took the damp clothes that hung on the line. I heard a small twig break from a distance, I turned

and saw a farmer with a rifle glaring at me with bloodthirsty eyes. 'Damn it. Please Mr., please. I just need to find my wife- Gracie. Please, just let me pass through and I will let you live.' I held my hands up. 'You're the guy, the council buried. How did you live?' The farmer continued to hold the rifle up. I gulped and ran, hearing gunshots following me as I ran further into the woods. I knew I had been hit many times.

I came upon a 1932 ford, which was left in his field, it was sitting in the farmer's lawn, one crank and I got it running, and it was backfiring away. Now the search is on...! The farmer was pissed so I jacked his classic car. He was shooting his gun at me. It looked like a scene from a Bonnie and Clyde movie. Nevertheless- I was on the run. Hauling ass and driving fast. It is going to be a lot faster to find her, by car!

Thank God, it is the 1990s. There are no cellphones yet in everyone's hands to reveal your locations or Global Positioning System or GPS to follow your trail. As I stepped harder on the gas pedal, I saw in the cracked mirror, the farmer running out onto the road screaming his guts out. 'He ran out of bullets.' I chuckled in laughter. Then something occurred to me, I had not laughed this much since my last memory of being with Gracie. I drove as fast as I could. Suddenly a deer ran into the road, and I swerved onto the other side of the road, nearly driving off the upcoming bridge, and fell into the water. I screamed in fear, like a little schoolchild. My name is Christer- James and I am a fallen angel, who is about to

drown in water that cannot kill me. Why am I screaming my head off like such a pussy? I know better than this.

I have had a lot of names, throughout the years, to keep up with the times. So, people would not be able to track me down, as I fled from town to town. Christer- James is not the name I was given by my mother. I cannot reveal my true name to you. I am not sure I can trust you with that information. Sorry, it is not you, it is me.

I thought about everything that has happened to me. So much darkness's have consumed me whole, and I cannot overcome it. But it was my death that made it permanent. I am a creature of the night, who can survive in the light. But I am not stereotyped by fallen angels who sparkle in the light or ones who can burn in the sunlight or have daylight rings to protect them.

I can walk in the light and not be damned by others. But that is no longer true. I am a stranger among those who knew me and loved me. I stayed in the water thinking and daydreaming of the memories that made me think about how my sister drowned and how the water must have consumed her lungs. Sucking in more water. I was frightened by that fact, and I turned away in shivers and swore I saw her face looking into mine. It was not her I see... No- It was a middle-aged man with a beard, hazel eyes, and dark tan skin. He wore an outfit of a religious man thought I was drowning I was just flowing.

He pulled me and directed me to swim, but I was not going to budge. He grew angry and impatient and his hold on me tightened. He was going under to help me. He was not going to let go, and I could not let yet another person die. So, I swam above, and he gasped for air. 'Geez, man, you got a death wish. Why didn't you swim, you know you cannot keep your head underwater for more than a minute or so?' He gasped more. 'Maybe I just wanted to stay there and drown,' I answered and looked away from him. 'Why?' he asked in confusion. 'Because I lost her,' I whispered in sadness.

Lost?

Who?

What?

When?

Did he ask?

~*~

Her...! I spoke.

Who is this girl? And what did she do to you? He spoke.

'Oh- just the gal that set my soul a-firer.'

I whipped- 'Oh never mind it's hopeless, just like I am hopeless.' 'Have some hope,' the man said.

I said- 'Hope! Hope is for babies and people that are alive that do not know how to live.'

I said- 'You didn't need to save me...' 'Um,' is the sound he made?

'I don't need saving.'

'You can't save something like this.'

'What are you saying, my child?'

'What am I saying... I am saying that I can last forever.'

'That I can't perish.'

'Impossible!' The man said.'

'I should bite- you so you can understand.'

'The hell I have lived. You could never understand it.' 'Bit me,' he said?

'Nah- that's okay you're not a young girl, so I think not.'

So, you have a lust for the flesh?'

'Yes... biting and kissing is my whole problem, that's something you'll never understand.'

'Confess my son.' he said to me.'

I said- 'What's the use, my soul has been dammed.'

Then he said- 'Oh no but you are wrong, any soul can be saved, my child. Confess and the Holy Ghost will lead you on your way. To her whomever she is... Dry your eyes my son there is no need to cry blood.'

'I know I am not being much of a man.'

He said- 'You're in love!' I nodded- yes.

He said- 'That's all it is. You will see her when the time is right if it is meant to be so. But you must have faith in her and God above you.'

'Indeed. I am in love. But love, in love I am so cursed. Damned to never love another. I am dead as she is dead. She is missing and I must find her.' I wiped away my tears and watched him immediately jump up and out of the water. 'So, are you coming? Let us see the lord guide us down the path to your love. What is her name?' He asked and led me to his truck and twisted his wet damp clothes. He also said it is time you put on yours.

On the bank next to the truck. I said- 'Yes, damn if I do, and damn if I don't.' 'Before we go you sure you don't want to be baptized?' Yes, I am sure, you might do that, and you will crumble to ash or something like that, for your safety I am going to say no. Did he whisper- Oh? I am not saying that I do not believe your

ways, I do. I was amazed to believe it; it is just I am not sure what would happen to me. Being this way that I am. Like I might turn to stone. Then he asked me the most random question: So, do fallen angels use a bathroom? I said- 'I haven't taken a shit, in years, ironic everyone piles theirs on me!' Then I said- 'Why did you ask me that?' 'Because I need to find a bathroom soon! Fallen angels frighten the poo out of me!' 'Don't worry, I only suck on girl!' He giggled awkwardly. I snickered; he made me laugh. The second time since her death. 'Don't fear I am not going to hurt you.' If anything, you are my first friend. The first person to ever trust me, and that trust, and not think something evil. He said- 'Okay friend... will find her. Do you see those sun rays over yonder... our God is showing us the way?' 'I believe that!' I said... (With surprising newfound faith.)

Chapter: 11

'With the lord, he will help guide the way. Come heartbroken person and let us start walking. We are there. The lord tells us it is not far.' He leads me into the woods and furthers the watery spot. I have been led to an old warehouse that seems secret because I have never seen it before. I hesitate before going in. He may be leading me into a trap. There is a saying. 'Don't trust anyone and keep your friends close and your enemies closer.' He is neither friend nor foe because I do not know him closely to decide. Yet I had trust... but not fully trust, I walked in and gasped. There is a body on a table covered with black cloth. I rushed over to open the veil and suddenly I gasped more. I found her. There she was lying on the table

looking at me with no soul nor life. I noticed she was still naked, and that sheet covered her body. I turned over to the priest and hugged him. He jumped but smiled. 'Uh- If anyone asks, I never hugged you.' I quickly took a step back and rubbed my neck nervously. I went back to Gracie, not caring about what was surrounding me, and picked her up and carried her out. I walked out and tripped over a wire and before I knew it. I am being thrown into the air being surrounded by a net with Gracie's dead body. 'Hey, Priest guy! A little help!' I called out and saw him come to my rescue but was knocked on the head by a mob member and been taken away by others in the pack. 'So, I finally meet the creature of the night. Hello Christer-James. If that is your real name.' He crossed his arms in a wicked way. It looks like I am not going to get out anytime soon.

He walked up to me, I was just hanging around, 'So it was all an act? You set me up, didn't you?' 'No!' Out of the shadows, a man slithered out, and said- 'It was not him; it was me!' I knew the voice- it was my dad! 'Son you never were good at anything, not even killing me.' 'I prayed and prayed to him to bring you here. You have two options, give me your body and soul or I take hers. Either way, son you have failed.' He said- 'Son I would not mind at all spending the rest of my days in her beautiful body, as a girl. As you know I have no adulthood now because of you. I am the one that wants you to go. I do not like you, I never did I wanted to kill you from the day you popped out of your mother. You are just like my dad in every way. May he rot in hell! Son no one wants you in this town.' 'Yet if Gracie is because of me, I can stay here, just like you I have been on the run.' (I did not

believe a word my dad said. I never did, he just wants to live in her so I die he knows that would kill me.) The holy man said- 'Put your trust in the Lord your ass belongs to your dad now.' Then he said- 'I must go now, sorry sonny, you are never alone, God be with you, and if you are not guilty; you have nothing to be afraid of in the eyes of the Lord. Let God have mercy on your soul.' 'Hey! - Hey!' He never looked back at me, and into the sun he went out the wood sliding doors. Then I remembered that I had my knife. Think Christer- James thinks to plan... I need to cut this and then cut him up into little pieces and light the pieces on fire before he clams her soul. Mine is already gone. Yet how? With my tiny love in my arms, how is this going to work? Whatever I do I have to move swiftly! All at that same moment I could not help but look into the closed eyes of my beloved. Her eyelashes long and shut tightly, her hair awe taking, with soft springy waves. It was like she was asleep, dreaming the most wonderful and darling fantasy ever. It was like she was smiling at me like she knew I was there with her as if I was her hero! I no- it is like she can slightly feel that I am with her. Yet I feel as if I will never trust again.

Yes- this act of betrayal of the first friend I had for a while had surely hurt me in ways you could never imagine. How a priest could turn so good to evil in a matter of seconds. God or the Devil had clouded his judgment. I had to get out and help my sweet Gracie before they could tarnish her anymore. I grabbed the knife and cut the ropes and we both fell to the ground with a loud thud. I put her over my shoulder and ran as fast as I could. I ran like the wind with a whooshing

sound and headed to the car. I kept driving until I realized something in a fairy tale story I once read. There was a prophecy that there was a special vial that could bring a dead person back to life. I must go and endure the most challenging trails to get there, but anything is worth having my Gracie back, who has been kissed by death.

Chapter: 12

'The Vial of Secrets' A secret, of love, a secret of life, and a secret of bringing someone back to life. It was not so much as a fairytale, as it was more something I read in Romeo and Juliet. So, the journey endures, now for a pink poison that works in reverse. I left a part out, as I ran out my dad got tangled and trapped in the net that I was in with her, that is when he fell to the wooden floor. That was meant for me, and before getting in the same car to escape (Oh the farmer was in it too, he knew I would take this car.) Like a bat out hell. I snatched the gas can in the back seat, and ran back, and let that place up, I saw him burn. The heat of the flames in my old still heart was thrilling! With any luck that is the last time, I must see his face in my life. Yes- a vial just like the lime green ones, which I can drink that takes me to a different time and a different place. Almost like a different life altogether. The green vials are what I have used throughout my life span from the 1990's back to the 1600s. I would love to see the 2000's!

I was thinking in my mind: I am not so dumb after all... I am I father?

I kept on driving and turning down roads. I am curious, if anyone sees me, I must not be followed. I looked back and hid my car in the bushes as I went to our secret place. It was a little cabin out of town, where we would both hide and express our true nature. She is my little witch, and I am her big fallen angel. I went inside and the floor creaked. I lifted the carpet, opened the hideout, and picked up a piece of paper. That paper is the most important thing to me now. It will mark my future. I looked at it. I was right, the map was still there. I grabbed it and jumped back into my car. I must get to Mount Vahalla if my life depends on it.

The funny thing is that it does. Everything is counting on me to get the pink vial.

I have gone over paved roads, which are smooth like her body. I have now gone over dirty paths, like the ground she has been covered over with. I have even walked where there was no path at all, just like I did to find here from day one. But now it is to get the vial, so I can get you back to me, so we can live our life. I looked high; I looked low. I have looked inside, and I have looked outside, I have felt her insides, I have felt around the outside. I have swum in the waters, on the way, I have lived in this car from day to day. I have fed off the blood of the mobbing wolves, howling at the full moon to trap me, in the woods. I kill them so they will not kill me. All for her! As you know, I cannot kiss her the way I should stay alive and thrive. If I do not find this vial soon, I will get so weak I break down

to nothing. Or at least that is how I feel; I am not sure what will happen to me. I am not sure what will happen to her, I must be her hero, I must be!

As I drove as fast as I could, the tires burned the road, and every time the gasoline or tires went out, I just hotwired a car and continued to drive. Nothing was going to stop me. Nothing. After five hours of driving, I finally reached Mount Vahalla. I sighed in relief and started to climb up the mountain. It is going to be a while before I get there, thank God I am not affected by the high altitude. Thank God, I am a fallen angel. A fallen angel in love.

'This would have been a lot faster if only I had had her broomstick!' I left her in the car in the dark trunk. I have no keys, and that is a good thing, but the doors are unlocked, but there was no choice but to leave her behind like I did before. It is not like I had a donkey to put her and me on to reach the Promised Land. I covered the car with willow branches, alone with her nude torso, at the base of the mountain. 'I am on my way now my love,' I said.' before leaving her. It is like she trembles, for knowing my absences, or she could see the forthcoming, I ran my fingers through her hair. Besides, closed the truck with a thud. I knew the only way to get it open would be with pure power in busting the latch. And after... I have this vial! I will be able to rip the car apart with my bare hands! Here we go again, the never-ending climbing battle for love! I hit the lock button on the door knowing that it would not be opened.

It always looked easy to climb a mountain, and I used to envy those with the strength to be able to climb a mountain and be just an ordinary person. I sighed and grumbled as I had only been climbing for about five minutes and I was not even close to reaching where I needed to go. I grabbed the next rock and suddenly little pebbles started to fall. 'That isn't a good sign.' I looked around trying to find another avenue I could try to get to the point of my destination. I tried to grab another rock and climbed up one until the rocks holding me up collapsed, and I fell off feeling like I was flying in midair for a few seconds before meeting the ground and feeling agony in my back. 'Fuck!' I screamed in pain. If I cannot enter the mountain by climbing it, I will have to find another entry point. But I am too close to stop now.

Chapter: 13

I am past the point of no return. I must have her love, or I will surely die. I was on the face of the rocks, I had three points of contact, my hand, one foot, and my left nut. I was just hanging there, could not go up, could not go down. I need a way up there, which is when, I feel like a stone, and when my only green vial in my jacket broke, 'Oh Bloody Hell' I said, somehow I jumped in time to 2016, everything was so different... a man walked up to me, he had a phone on his wrist, and all kinds of gadgets that I have never seen before, that would beep, ring, and talk. He said- 'Why are you lying on the ground.' I said- 'I am trying to get to the top.' That is when he said- 'You- dumb ass take the inclined plane to the top it's

only three dollars.' So, like a moron, I get up and walk in line and hand the teenage girl, who runs the ride, my timeworn money. She looked at me like I was a worm! That is when I realized the car was gone, and there was a resort at the top of the mountain, and I was all out of green vials. So now what am I going to do? Now I need to get back to that time, I was in...! And now I need to get the pink and green vial made. But where and how?

Here I am lost, stuck in a time zone that is not ready for me. I looked around me absorbed in my pristine environment and realized I am in a time zone a year ahead of me. I saw a hot blond skinny jogger running past me, and I tapped her on the shoulder. 'Hi, miss, I am a bit lost. Can you tell me what the date is and where exactly I am?' I asked her sweetly. 'Uh, - Sir. Did you have a lot to drink last night? What are you wearing?' She crossed her arm as she looked at me up and down. 'Yeah- I drank a lot of bourbons, and I had a costume party. Could you please let me know where I am and what time I am in?' I asked her about getting impatient. 'Oh- you must have had a lot to drink. You are in California and the year is May 5th, 2016. Does that help- smart ass?' she asked, looking at me with concern. 'Thanks- miss.' I smiled and walked off. I am in 2016, this is going to take me a while.

Really- I just wanted to slap her into last year, she was so belligerent but so good to look at. She did not even make eye contact with me! I know- she was shy but come on, I am not that fucked up in the face! Or is it because guys do not

wear capes anymore? I smell bad. Looking at her like what are those strings hanging out of her short shorts- slacks? One is a white braided thing in the front, and the other two soft pink ones by her butt? My God if they get any shorter, she is going to have to powder to more cheeks and cut another head of hair! They do that now, all the time, would that be a good thing? Did I just see her nipples popping out at me too, though her skimpy white top?

Damn girl goes and puts something on! Global warming must be true? Just look at all these teen girls half-naked. My God- I find myself standing here half-hard, and drilling. Look at that shit around their eyes that is black, they have more eye shadow around their eyes than I do mine. How can their faces be so gorgeous and flawless? Is what I doing now cheating? God, I need to get back before I nail one of these little girls! Or worse kiss them! Surely if I did that, I would nail my coffin. If I would get caught! Oh, if she finds out! How tempting, this is... I never have seen so many good-looking girls like this. I walk around like a nomad, almost getting run over by all the cars. How things have changed just since the 1990s! It is like being on a different planet if you go back to the 1600s. What is McDonald's doing everywhere you look? That shit would kill you, but everyone is eating it. Just like what is with all these big ass ladies' doing just walking around in the Wall-mart at 3 am? Go home! I have never seen so much 'Junk' in one place! I feel like I am walking around in the twilight zone!

I cannot believe how attracted I was to a girl from another time. A girl who is in another world, who would shit herself, if she knew half of the things about my life. But I would love to bend her over and rip off her shirt...Oh shit! What the fuck am I thinking? I am smarter than that to follow my sexual desires. My heart belongs to Gracie anyway, we would never see each other again, so it is not worth it. I reassured myself. I needed to find a way out of this world. I looked around me and went down to every bloody shop of a clairvoyant pretending to be one.

'What? Doesn't anyone know honesty and manners anymore? I mean come on!' I growled in frustration and found myself at the last existing 'Witch shop.' I walked in and asked her to tell me what I needed just by touching me. A middle-aged woman around her twenties touched me, and I finally got the answer wanted. She knew exactly who I was, and what I was doing at that time. She brewed a potion without mentioning a word to me and finally put it in the vial. I swallowed the entire vial and suddenly my world changes all around and I am back at Mount Vahalla. I sigh in relief and attempt to jump as high as I can to get to the top. I could not believe what I saw with my eyes. It was a lake full of lava and on the other side, there lay the special potion I so needed. This is going to take a while.

I needed to make a rope bridge, after that thought, I was like something is not right! I remember I drank blue vial, and it did send me back. But there is one big problem, it turned me into a little green serpent with a cape. I look like a

fucked-up Kermit the serpent, after a long night of smashing and drinking. I could see myself in the car paint! Now hopping around, I could see everything, but with like beer goggles on. That is what I got for wanted to make one of the girls back there! She read my heart, hands, and thoughts, and must have put that in the mixture.

I believed that there would be side effects, but nothing like this... how am I going to get the trunk open now like this, I do not even have any thumbs, I could not jack it... you know even if I wanted too. I knew the only way I would be turned back into me is to kiss the girl that is my true love on the lips. Or at least that is how the story should go. 'I know why she did this... I was cheating in my mind, and she did not like it, all witches stick together, this is payback.' Yet which lips do they mean? What do I kiss the valval or mouth?

In my mind I was thinking dirty, will at least I have the tongue for it. I will have to kiss both sets of lips on her body and see what happens. That is if I can find a way up there! Good thing she dies, I do not think girls like her like kissing serpents! Yet how do I get into this car like this now, and get where I need to go? So now I need to kiss her, to become a man, and I need to kiss her for her to become alive, and yet I still need to get that pink vial. You know... call me delusional but, who wanted me in her bed, and wanted to play with my broomstick? She was into me, like she knew that I had something she needed. She did not want me to go. She did not want me to kiss Gracie, she tricked me. I need to stop trusting

random-ass witches! I will be lucky if I do not get warts and knowing me as they will be on my genitals! At this point, I would just be happy to get my six, and one-half inches back like before. This girl is killing me, but that is love!

I fell off a cliff and thudded to the ground. I looked around and found my car. Thank God, she is still in there, I managed to see in through a little rust hole. Then I realized that I cannot open the door because I have no hands. I frowned and shook my head. How was I going to get myself out of this?

Then it just hit me, I need to find a lily flower and a four-leaf clover and mix it with some monthly blood of the girl I love, that is the potion I need. I hope that is all right. Before I kiss her lips, and I become a man! I will do it myself, like always. So, I hopped around and nibbled on a lily that was in the parking lot. I hopped around till nightfall till I found a four-leaf clover. Thankfully, there was a rust hole in the back of the trunk of the car that I slithered into after falling on my ass several times. Anyways, I got the blood I needed when I was liking her up and down. I heard a ticklish giggle. The blood was old, but it was there deep inside, the taste of it was indescribable, and I kissed both lips in two jumps, now I did not know what was going to happen. I saw what looked like magic dust puffing in the air, yet that was the only light I could see. Something happened it just got cramped in here... but what? I had to go on foot.

Chapter: 14

Holy shit! I have a penis, and no longer look like one! I am a man; I am a man...! I cannot believe it I am a man! I never knew how nice it was to have to rearrange my nut sack. I have legs, I have arms, and let us not forget about their thumbs! Eyes! Do I have eyes? Please, the sacred voice asking God tells me that I have eyes. I can see! I can see! Holy fuck! And yet again, it is dark in this trunk, so maybe that is it.

Here I am cramped in my fucking small truck. God, I feel sorry for anything that I packed here. I am on top of Gracie who needs some clothes, but I cannot do that until I get the potion. All this bloody trouble for some fucking resurrection. I rearrange myself and kick open the trunk with my incredible fallen angle strength, and I jump out feeling a chill in the air.

Rain is blistering heavily towards me and her. I see from my left eye what is left of my trunk, and I frown realizing it. There is no way I will be able to fix this or put it back on my car. I jumped up high and reached the same position I was in. I found myself in front of a lava pool with very weak and delicate steppingstones. I could see from a distance the beautiful sparkle of the vial I so desperately needed. 'Well, here I go,' I whispered to myself and jumped onto the first step, almost falling into the pool. Sunlight could not kill me, but lava would. I jumped again and sighed in relief that I made it. I continue jumping until I am halfway across the pool to the vial.

I see it! It is closer. My heart leaps in joy, but I cannot stop now. Not when she is exposed and easy to get kidnapped. I jumped onto the last step onto the landing. I walk up to the rock holding the vial. 'Only those who have worthy intentions may be allowed to take such a vial.' A voice calls out from a distance. Could it be that I stepped on a vocal recording or is there someone already there watching my every move and ready to take what I so need?

'Who is your daddy!' the voice calls out; I look behind me I see him; with my girls' legs slung... one over each of his shoulders, her hair and head dangling downwards. I thought I killed you, I screamed! 'Son- son- son boy you will never kill me! I am just like you until I get the love I need. You, daddy, think it is time for your bedtime story, while I tuck and suck on your girl in me in my bed! What do you think about that?'

I said- 'Fuck no you douche-bag!' 'Son- you need to go and suck on some soap, with that dirty mouth of yours! Anyways there is nothing you can do about it.' Now the fighting begins I must push him into this hot stuff, so I can get my hot stuff back. He has gotten me on the edge, after throwing her to the ground, like she was a rag doll, I knew that something of hers broke. Yet I had to think about me for the time being. How is it going to be me... or him! Whose love for her is stronger?

I fucking hate this guy. One would imagine the bloody bastard has nine lives, but it is ironic since I have more than just nine lives. He smirks as he watches

me figuring out how- I was going to stop him for once. But I had the advantage of him, but with the lava, so did he. I jumped, and kicked him in the stomach, watching him fall to the ground with me standing on top of him like a surfboard. He grabs my ankles, and I trip feeling my hair touch a little bit of lava, that was so damn hot, it was like fire in my hair.

I yelled and moved away and watched him punch me in the face three times. I could feel my sour blood spill from my mouth until I realized, Blood is my friend. I leap up and grab his neck and lift him choking him out. I walked over and held him over the lava pool. 'Son. Let us talk about this. I am sorry. Please do not let go of me!' He begged and I looked over to my Gracie, and I thought about how he wanted to sexually assault her like he sexually assaulted my mother. He was the one man who could make me regret having him as my father.

I dropped him, and he screams as he falls into the lava. I sped away from the lava and watched it consume him whole. I turned around and picked up my vial and poured it down Gracie's porthole to the soul. I understood something clearly at last of her soul start to brighten as her skin color became white once again. She opened her eyes and saw me. She jumped and moved away. 'Gracie. It is me. It is Christer- James. Do you remember me?' I crawled towards her, and she looked down screaming, even more, covering the private parts of her body.

Her first words she said snakingly- 'W- Why th- the fuuu-cckk, am I naked?' Then she proceeded to say freaking out. 'Do you see all this come and

blood dripping out of me? Like you could have shot it in my face for all I care, not deep inside me!' she asked me- 'Did you do this to me?' I just looked at her in awe! She kept running at the mouth- 'If you did... you know that I'm not on the pill!' I just looked dumbfounded thinking all girls or on that shit at least they are now. 'You know this right?' I said 'No.' What, you are going to have a fat pregnant wife.'

'Yes, know when a girl is pissed when she starts moving her hands around like Beyoncé!' Now in my mind, I was thinking this question- 'Is she, or isn't she? Or worse who is the daddy?' I was hoping it would all drip out. (Dr-ip! Dr-ip!) And it would not be he is the seed that impregnates her. That is when I thought there must be a virgin vial also? Just like there is a pill to stop her from getting pregnant. But do I need to stop it... would this baby be mine? Or would I kill my baby? Or would I be killing his? There must be something, I can do before she rips my dick off, and slaps me up with it! But what?

I knew I had to ask the question which would change my life. 'Is the baby mine?' She lifted her shoulders in question. 'I don't think so.' My heart raced, feeling more rage than ever. He is dead and yet he still torments me. 'Is it my father? You do not need to ever worry about him anymore. He has gone out of our lives forever.' I grabbed her wrists and she quickly moved away and started jumping on the steppingstones. 'Gracie?' I asked in concern and followed her. 'No! Leave me alone! I do not know who you are! You are so not the man I thought you

were.' She continued to get further away from me. I wonder how long it will take for her to realize she has no idea where she is.

This is horrifying to me, but I could see that baby coming out looking like my dad, or even being my dad oddly enough, like being born again out of her. Just popping slightly out... 'Looking like Achmed the Dead Terrorist!' Then something inside me just snapped. (One eye twitched twice.) 'I am done, I am just done fighting for her.' I thought- 'There comes a time where every man reaches his breaking point. And mine was when she thought I would do that to her or let him have his way. She holds me responsible, regardless? Like I was deviant demonic sick-o.'

(There comes a time when you must let her go.) If she wants me, she will come back to me... right? Naturally, I left her to walk off into the sunset, but cheeks wiggling away. (Am I going to regret it?) I do not know yet. So... I am thinking about her already. In nine months, I will know if I am a daddy or not. Even though she thinks... I have no way of truly knowing. She is going by feel and that is not always right. She will be back if she loves me! That is not if the mob of wolves do not find her and the baby first. And do what I said they would. But I am just DONE! I wonder where she is going to go now. I wonder what I am going to do without her now.

She is naked running across a pond of lava, who is already four weeks pregnant. She is my love navigating a world that has moved on from her death. I

could not just leave her. 'Perhaps I could watch her from a distance and protect her when she needs it. I thought. I saw that she had finally reached the other side and I continued to follow her. 'I don't trust you, but where the fuck am I?' Gracie covered her boobs and vagina. 'Mount Vahalla. Look, at least let me drive you back to your hometown, and you can get some clothes. Here takes my jacket.' I gave her my jacket and she took it.

'TURN AROUND!' She screamed, and I turned around when I did not, and she put the jacket on, and I spun around and led her to my truck. 'What do you remember?' I asked trying to have a conversation. 'Nothing. I cannot remember anything.' She sat hunched overlooking out the window, fogging it up with her breath. I put on the heater and heat started to come out through the vents. She screamed until she inspected the vents closer. 'Why do you drive so fast?' 'It's Just a fallen angle thing,' I said.

'What is it?' she asked dumbfounded. Looked at her and it just hit me, she is not a fallen angel or a witch, she is just a teenaged girl. After all this, she is just the way she was before all this took place. I went along with it. 'It is not all just stifling air coming out. Even if we do not breathe- It helps in keeping bodies like ours warm, to feel loved- do you like it, this feeling?' I replied keeping my eyes on the road. 'It burns my skin.' She looked at me. 'Yes, that happens when your skin is cold. But do not worry, it will not hurt you unless it is on higher.' I smiled. Knowing that it was frostbite.

'I believe you.' She smiled with a sparkle in her eye. 'You do remember me. Don't you?' I smiled. 'How could I ever forget the love of my life? I love you Christer- James. And I am pregnant, I created a potion to prevent myself from getting pregnant by your father before raped me. I remembered what you said to me. So, I am fine and thank you for bringing me back to life. So instead of going back there, why do not we go and explore the world like France and get me some clothes.' She chuckled and held my hand. I laughed and we both listened to old music as we rode into the sunlight.

Nine months later a new-fallen angle baby was born. A little girl that was all ours, we named Faith. We both reached the successful conclusions that we want so badly, and found love within love, by having something and someone to love more than life itself.

Interval: 3 Girls' Camp

1

Amy was sitting on her front steps when we pulled up. It was early evening, just getting dark, and all up and down our street, lights were on in the houses, people out walking their dogs or children. Someone a few streets over were barbecuing, the smell mingling in the air with cut grass and recent rain. I got out of the car and put my bag on the front walk, looking across the street at Amy's house, the only light coming from her kitchen, and spilling out into the empty carport. She

lifted one hand and waved at me from the stoop. 'Mom, I'm going to Amy's,' I said. 'Fine.' I still was not forgiven for this, not yet.

Nonetheless, it was late, she was tired, and those days, we had to pick our battles. I knew the way across the street and up scarlet's walk by heart; I could have done it with every sense lost. The dip in the street halfway across the two prickly bushes on either end of her walk that left tiny scratches on your skin when you brushed against them. It was eighteen steps from the beginning of the walk to the front stoop; we had measured it when we were in sixth grade and obsessed with facts and details. We had spent months calculating distances and counting steps, trying to organize the world into manageable bits and pieces. Now I just walk toward her in the half-darkness, aware only of the sound of my footfalls and the air conditioner humming softly under the side window.

'Hey,' I said, and she scooted over to make room for me.

2

'How's it going?' It seemed like the stupidest thing to ask once I had said it, but there were not any right words. I looked over at her as she sat beside me, barefoot, her hair pulled away from her face in a loose ponytail. She had been crying. I was not used to seeing her this way. 'Amy?' I said, "There in the dark," and then she turned to me. I saw her face was streaked with tears. For a minute, I did not know what to do. I thought again of that picture tucked in her mirror, of her and Jack just weeks ago, the water so bright and shiny behind them. And I thought of

what she had done all the millions of times I had cried to her, collapsing at even the slightest wounding of my heart or pride. Amy had always been the stronger, the livelier, the braver. So, I reached over and pulled her to me, wrapping my arms around her, and held my best friend close, returning so many favors all at once. We sat there for a long time, Amy, and me, with her house looming over us and mine right across the street staring back with its bright windows. It was the end of summer; it was the end of a lot of things. I sat there with her, feeling her shoulders shake under my hands. I had no idea what to do or what would come next. All I knew was that she needed me, and I was here. And for now, that was about the best we could do.

3

The girl who punched out Lisa, the meanest, most fiendish of the pink-bike girls that the first summer she moved in, on a day when they surrounded us and tried to make us cry. The girl who kept a house, and her mother, up and running since she was five, now playing mother to a thirty-five-year-old kid.

The girl who had kept the world from swallowing me whole, or so I had always believed. Amy was a redhead, but not in an orangey, carrot-top kind of way. Her color was more auburn, deep, and red mixed with browns that made her green eyes seem almost luminous. Her skin was pale, with masses of freckles for the first few years I knew her; as we grew older, they faded into a sprinkling across her nose, as if they had been scattered there by hand. She was an inch and three

quarters shorter than me, her feet a size larger, and she had a scar on her stomach that looked like a mouth smiling from when she had gotten her appendix out. She was beautiful in all the comatose, accidental ways that I was not, and I was jealous more than I would ever have admitted. I was forever known as 'Amy's friend Hallie.' But I did not mind. Without her, I knew I would be spending time together in the bus parking lot with the nerds and Beth Vaughn. That was, I was sure, the destiny in store for me until the day Amy looked up from behind those white sunglasses and made a spot for me next to her for the rest of my life. To me, Amy was foreign and exotic. But she had said she would have given anything for my long hair and tan in summer, for my thick eyelashes and eyebrows. Not to mention my father, my conventional family, away from Beth with her whims and fancies.

4

It was an even trade, our envy of each other; it made everything fair. We always believed we lived perfectly parallel lives. We went through the same phases at the same time; we both liked gory movies and sappy stuff, and we knew every word to every song on the old musical soundtracks my parents had. Amy was more confident, able to make friends fast, whereas I was shy and quiet, hanging back from the crowd. And I was grateful. Because life is an ugly, awful place to not have a best friend. When I pictured myself, it was always like just an outline in a coloring book, with the inside not yet completed. All the standard features were there. But the colors, the zigzags, and plaids, the bits and pieces that made up me,

Hallie, were not yet in place. Amy's lively reds and golds helped some, but I was still waiting. He went back to his friends from Lakeview, like his best friend Beth.

Sometimes we would see them walking down our street, between our two houses, in the middle of the night, smoking cigarettes and laughing. They were different, and they fascinated us. By leaving the popular crowd, Jack & Beth became a conundrum. No one was sure where he fit in, and he was friendly with everyone, sort of the great equalizer of our high school. He was famous for his pranks on substitute teachers and was always asking to borrow a dollar in exchange for a delightful story; he told outlandish tales, half-true at best, but they were so funny you got your dollar's worth. The one I remember he told me had to do with psychotic Girl Scouts who were stalking him. I did not believe him, but I gave him two dollars and skipped lunch that day. It was worth it. Each of us had our own story about Jack, something he had done, said, or passed down. More than anything, it was the things he did not do that made Jack Beth so intriguing; he seemed so far from the rest of us and yet implicitly he belonged to everyone. At the end of every school year, there was the annual slideshow, full of candid shots that had not been made in the yearbook. We all piled into the auditorium and watched as our classmates' faces filled the huge screen, everyone cheering for their friends and booing people they did not like. There was only one picture of Jack Beth, but it was a good one: he was sitting on the wall by himself, wearing that black baseball hat he always wore, laughing at something out of the frame, something we could not see. The grass was so green behind him and above that a clear stretch of blue

sky. When the slide came up, the entire crowd in that auditorium cheered, clapping, and hooting and craning their necks to look for Jack, who was sitting up on the balcony with Beth Faulkner, looking embarrassed.

But that was what he was to us, always: the one thing that we all had in common. The funeral was the next day, Thursday. She needs some rest, or she is just going to crash.'

5

For most of the high school, we had not known Jack Beth that well, even though we had grown up in the same neighborhood. He had gone away the summer after middle school to California and returned transformed: tan, taller, and suddenly gorgeous. He was immediately the boy to date. He went out with Beth Tabor for about fifteen minutes, then Beth Gunderson, the head cheerleader, for a few months. But he never seemed to fit in with that crowd of soccer-team captains and varsity jackets. I went across the street to Amy's after breakfast, in bare feet and cutoffs, carrying two black dresses I could not decide between. I had only been to a funeral before, my grandfathers in Buffalo, and I had been so little someone had dressed me. This was different. 'Come in,' I heard Beth call out before I even had a chance to knock at the side door. She was sitting at the kitchen table, coffee cup in front of her, flipping through Vogue. 'Hey,' I said to her as she smiled at me. 'Is she awake?' 'Practically all night,' she said quietly, turning the page and taking a sip of coffee. 'She was on the couch when I got up. I had to keep from smiling. These

were the same words I heard from Amy about Beth regularly; for as long as I had known them their roles had been reversed. When Martian had been depressed and heavily drinking a few years back, it was Amy who came knocking at our front door in her nightgown at two am. because she had found Beth passed out cold halfway up the front walk, her cheek imprinted with the ripples and cracks in the concrete. My father carried Beth into the house while my mother tried her best therapy shtick on Amy, who said nothing and curled up in the chair beside Beth's bed, watching over her until morning. My father called Amy 'earnest'; my mother said she was 'in rejection.' 'Hey.' I looked over to see Amy standing in the doorway in a red shirt and cut off long underwear, her hair still messed up from sleeping. She nodded at the dresses in my hand. 'Which one are you going to wear?' 'I don't know,' I said. She came closer, taking them from my hands, then held each up against me, squinting. 'The short one,' she said quietly, laying the other on the counter next to the fruit bowl. 'The one with the scoop neck always makes you look like you're twelve.' I looked down at the scoop-necked dress, trying to remember where I had worn it before. It was always Amy who kept track of such things: dates, memories, lessons learned. I forgot everything, barely able to keep my head from one week to the next. But Amy knew it all, from what she was wearing when she got her first kiss to the name of the sister of the boy, I had met at the beach the summer before; she was our oracle, our common memory.

She opened the fridge and took out the milk, then crossed the room with a box of Rice Krispies under her arm, grabbing a bowl from the open dishwasher on her way. She sat at the head of the table, with Beth to her left, and I took my seat on the right. Even in their tiny family, with me as an honorary member, there were traditions. Amy poured herself some cereal, adding sugar from the bowl between us. 'Do you want some?' 'No,' I said. 'I ate already.' My mother had made me French toast and eggs, after spending most of the early morning gossiping over the back fence with her best friend, Beth, who was known for her amazing azaleas and her mouth, the latter of which I had heard all morning through my window. Mrs. Riley had known Beth well from CCD and had already been over with a chicken casserole to relay her regrets. Mrs. Trilby had also seen me and Jack and Amy more than once walking home from work together, and late one night she had even caught a glimpse of Amy and Jack kissing under a streetlight. He was a sweet boy; she had said in her nasal voice. He mowed their lawn after Arthur's coronary and always got her the best bananas at Milton's, even if he had to sneak some from the back. A nice boy. So, my mother came inside newly informed and sympathetic and made me a huge breakfast that I picked at while she sat across the table, coffee mug in hand, smiling as if waiting for me to say something. As if all it took was Jack - Beth mowing a lawn, or finding the perfect banana, to make him a worthwhile morning. 'So, what time's the service?' Beth asked me, picking up her Marlboro Lights from the lazy Beth in the middle of the table. 'Eleven o'clock.' She lit a cigarette. 'We are packed with appointments today, but I will try to make it. Okay?'

'Okay,' Amy said. Beth worked at the Lakeview Mall at Fabulous You, a glamour photography store where they had makeup and clothes and got you all gussied up, then took photographs that you could give to your husband or boyfriend. Beth spent forty hours a week making up stay-at-home spouses and teenagers in too much lipstick and the same evening gowns, posing them with an empty champagne glass as they gazed into the camera with their best come-hither look. It was a hard job, considering some of the raw material she had to work with; not everyone is cut out to be glamorous. She often said there was only so much of a miracle to be worked with concealer and creative lighting. Beth pushed her chair back, running a hand through her hair; she had Amy's face, round with deep green eyes, and thick blonde hair she bleached every few months. She had bright red fingernails, smoked constantly, and owned more lingerie than Victoria's Secret.

7

The first time I had met her, the day they moved in, Beth had been flirting with the movers, dressed in hip-huggers, a macramé halter top that showed her stomach, and heels at least four inches high. She was not like my mother; she was not like anyone's mother. To me, she looked just like Barbie, and she has fascinated me ever since. 'Well,' Beth drawled, standing up and ruffling Amy's hair with her hand as she passed. 'Got to get ready for the salt mines. You girls call if you need me. Okay?' 'Okay,' Amy said, taking another mouthful of cereal. 'Bye, Beth,' I said. 'She won't come,' Amy said once Beth was safely upstairs, her

footsteps creaking above us. 'Why not?' 'Funerals freak her out.' She dropped her spoon in her bowl, finished. 'Beth has a convenient excuse for everything.' When we went upstairs to get ready, I flopped on the edge of her bed, which was covered in clothes and magazines and mismatched blankets and sheets. Amy opened her closet and stood in front of it with her hands on her hips, contemplating. Beth yelled good-bye from downstairs and the front door slammed, followed by the sound of her car starting and backing out of the driveway. Through the window over Amy's bed, I could see my mother sitting in the swing on our front porch, drinking coffee and reading the paper. As Beth drove past, she waved; her 'neighbor smile' on, and went back to reading. 'I hate this,' Amy said suddenly, reaching into the closet and pulling out a navy-blue dress with a white collar. 'I don't have a single thing that's appropriate.' 'You can wear my twelve-year-old dress,' I offered, and she made a face. 'I bet Beth's got something,' she said suddenly, leaving the room. Beth's closet was a legend; she was a fashion plate and a packrat, the most dangerous of pairings. I reached over and turned on the radio next to the bed, leaning back and closing my eyes. I had spent half my life in Amy's room, sprawled across the bed with a stack of Seventeen magazines between us, picking out future prom dresses and reading up on pimple prevention and boyfriend problems. Right next to her window was the shelf with her pictures: me and her at the beach two years ago, in matching sailor hats, doing a mock salute to my father's camera. Beth at eighteen, an old school picture, faded and creased. And finally, at the end and unframed, that same picture of her and Jack at the lake.

Since I left for Sisterhood Camp, she had moved it, so it was within easy reach. I felt something pressing into my back, hard, and I reached under to move it; it was a boot with a thick sole that resisted when I pulled on it. I shifted my position and gave it another yank, wondering when Amy had bought hiking boots. I was about to yell out and ask her, when it suddenly yanked back, hard, and there was an explosion of movement on the bed, arms and legs flailing, things falling off the sides as someone rose out of the mess around me, shaking off magazines and blankets and pillows in all directions.

-And- suddenly, I found myself face to face with Beth Faulkner. He glanced around the room as if he were not sure where he was. His blond hair, cut short over his ears, tucked up in tiny cowlicks. In one ear was a row of three silver hoops-ie. 'What?' He managed, sitting up straighter and blinking. He was all tangled up, one sheet wrapped around his arm. 'Where's Amy?' 'She's down there,' I said automatically, pointing toward the door, as if that was down, which it was not. He shook his head, trying to wake up. I would have been just as shocked to see Beth in Amy's bed; I had no idea she even knew Beth Faulkner. We all knew who he was, of course. had somehow landed in my lap, as a Boy with a Reputation, his neighborhood legend preceded him. And what was he doing in her bed, anyway? It could not mean no. She would have told me; she told me everything. And Beth had said Amy slept on the couch. 'Well, I think I can wear this,' I heard Amy say as she came back down the hallway, a black dress over her arm. She looked at Beth, then at me, and walked to the closet as if it were the most normal thing in the world to

have a strange boy in your bed at ten in the morning on a Thursday. Beth lay back, letting one hand flop over his eyes. His boot, and his foot in it, where it remained. Beth Faulkner's foot was in my lap. 'Did you meet Hallie?' Amy asked him, hanging the dress on her closet door.

8

'Hallie, this is Beth. Beth, Hallie.' 'Hi,' I said immediately aware of how high my voice was. 'Hey.' He nodded at me, moving his foot off my lap as if that was nothing special, then got off the bed and stood up, stretching his arms. 'Man, I feel awful.' 'Well, you should,' Amy said in the same scolding voice she used with me when I was especially spineless. 'You were incredibly wasted.' Beth leaned over and rooted around under the sheets, looking for something, while I sat there and stared at him. He was in a white T-shirt with ripped along the hem, and dark blue shorts, those clunky boots on his feet. gathering it in her hands, which meant she was thinking. 'So, you need a ride to the service?' 'No,' he said, walking to the bedroom door with his hands in his pockets, stepping over my feet as if I was invisible. 'I'll see you there.' 'Okay.' He was tall and wiry, and tan from a summer working landscaping around the neighborhood, which was the only place I ever saw him, and even then, from a distance. 'Have you seen-?' he began, but Amy was already reaching for the bedside table and the baseball cap lying there. Dan- leaned over and took it from her, then put it on with a sheepish look. 'Thanks.' 'You're welcome.' Amy pulled her hair back behind her head, Amy stood by the doorway.

'Is it cool? To go out this way?' he was whispering, gesturing down the hall to Beth's empty room. 'It's fine.' He nodded, then stepped toward her awkwardly, leaning down to kiss her cheek. 'Thanks,' he said quietly, in a voice I was not supposed to hear. 'I mean it.' 'It's no big deal,' Amy said, smiling up at him, and we both watched him as he loped off, his boots clunking down the stairs and out the door.

When- I heard it swing shut, I walked to the window and leaned against the glass, waiting until he came out on the walk, squinting, and began those eighteen steps to the street. Across the street my mother looked up, folding her paper in her lap, watching too. 'I cannot believe you,' I said aloud, as Beth Faulkner passed the prickly bushes and turned left, headed out of Lakeview – Neighborhood of Friends. 'He was upset,' Amy said simply. 'Jack was his best friend.' 'But you never even told me you knew him. And then I come up here and he is in your bed.' 'I just knew him through Jack. He is messed up, Hallie. He has a lot of problems.' 'It's so weird, though,' I said. 'I mean, that he was here.' 'Jack Herring.' Amy sighed loud and hard like in all the girl's ears that were just her ways. Something was up with her more than always. 'He just needed someone,' she said. 'That's all.' I still had my eye on Beth Faulkner as he moved past the perfect houses of our neighborhood, seeming out of place among hissing sprinklers and thrown newspapers on a bright and shiny late summer morning. I could not say then what it was about him that kept me there. But just as he was rounding the corner, disappearing, he turned around and lifted his hand, waving at me, as if he knew

even without turning back that I would still be there in the window, watching him go away. 'What about him?' who- HIM- yours truly repeated. The camp leader rolled her eyes this time getting frustrated, thinking, I was sure, that this was no emergency. 'What about him?' she said. Amy Ansley has been my BFF for as long as I can recall. It is a girlie thing- that how we are... That is why I knew she was the BFF I could count on... when she entitled me at camp as just that, throughout the most horrible week of my young freaking miserable pre-teen girl life, that something was so wrong with it all even before she said it was. Just by her speech on the phone I knew- I knew by the texts too, yet that was the sealed fate there. I identified this as a fact now. 'It's Jack,' she said quietly. Her words crackled over distance. The camp administrator, a young lady named Jodi with long hair and tube socks, came loose cantankerously beside me- she was. Now At camp- I am here- at this place- Ya! Like- be there- I am- theoretical to be Isolated from the Weights of Society to Recover Ourselves as Ladies. Otherwise, some crap like that- We remain theoretical to get phone calls at this and that time. Not at twelve o'clock on a Monday, inspiring you out of your floppy camp bed, and smelly pillow- then the woods behind- and all that to like the outhouse- then to a room too glum for me to say what it really looks like- then a phone which considered deeply in your small hand. Him- 'He's passed on.' Amy's voice was uniform, flat as if she were declaiming development tables. I like- could hear jingling and wallowing in the far back.

'Lifeless?' The camp leader beheld dumbly, quickly with anxious movements, and then I revolved away from her looking eyes into mine. 'In what way?' More splashing, and swiftly I apprehended she was washing dishes- a girl named Jacky in the far front. I was now there- Amy, always capable, would do housework during atomic warfare. 'A dirt bike accident... is how- I said like lost in the out-load thoughts- This afternoon. He got hit by a car on the short summit.' I alleged. 'He's dead?' yep- I repeated, and the room gives the impression of being very minor unexpectedly, overcrowded, and as the camp administrator put her arm around me, all cuddly- I trembled her off, marching away- not liking the mushy goo-goo crap. I in-visualized Amy at the sink in limits and a tank-shirt, her hair dragged back, phone raised between her boob or lack of them between her shoulders. 'Oh, my God.' It was said. 'I know,' Amy whispered, and there was a great babbling noise as water whizzed down her sink down her paints- I look like I pee-ed. She was not crying... about that even if it was embarrassing to her- yet she said- 'got yah.' 'Hallie?' she said again, and I knew it was hard for her to even ask. She had never been the one who needed me all that much. 'Hold on,' I said to her in that dim room, the night it all began. We sat there on the line for what seemed like the lengthiest time, the energetic in the background, the only noses. I wanted to crawl through the handset right then, dashing out on the other side in her kitchen, beside her.

Jack, a boy we had grown up with, a boy one of us had loved. Gone- bead- lost forgotten- soon. The paper said he died on impact, the bike a total loss.

He was turning left onto Lovell Avenue from the summit when a manufacturer in a BMW hit him dead on, knocking him off the motorbike he had only had since June and sending him flying twenty-one feet. It was not his fault. Jack Beth was sixteen years old. I had never been good at friendships; I was too quiet, too mousy, and tended to choose bossy, mean girls who pushed me around and sent me home crying to my mother. Lakeview, A Neighborhood of Fiends, was full of little fiend-ett-es on pink bicycles with Barbie carrying cases in their white or pinkie, flower-appliquéd baskets. I had never had a best friend. 'Hallie?' she said softly, suddenly. Lakeview, our neighborhood, spread-eagled across several streets and cul-de-sacs, bracketed only by wooden posts and hand-carved signs, lined in yellow paint: Welcome to Lakeview, an area of Friends. 'Yes?' 'Can you come home now?' I observed out the window at the dark blackish, and the lake beyond, the moon sparkling off it. It was the end of August, the end of summer, School started in one week; we would be juniors this year. One year some high-school students had gone around, and crossed out there in friends, leaving us a Neighborhood of friends, something my father found panic-stricken. It tickled him so much, my mother often wondered aloud if he had done it himself. 'I'm on my way at this moment.' She was sitting on the front steps of her new house, watching them cart furniture in, her elbows propped on her knees, chin in her hands, wearing heart-shaped sunglasses with white plastic frames. The first time I saw Amy was the day she and her mother, Matron, moved in. I was sitting by my window- I was eleven or younger I would say- anyways. watching the movers, when I saw a girl just my age, with red

hair and blue tennis shoes. And she completely ignored me as I came up to her front walk, stood in the thrown shade of the awning, and waited for her to say something. Jack said- died at 9:59 p.m. on August 14th. They said- He was also the only boy Amy had ever absolutely loved.

9

We had known him since we were kids, as if we had known each other. The other characteristic distinguishing of Lakeview was the new airport three miles away, which meant a constant stream of airplanes taking off and landing. My father loved this, too; he spent most evenings out on the back porch, looking up excitedly at the sky as the distant rumblings got louder and louder... nearer, closer, and handier, until the white noise of a plane would burst out overhead, lights blinking, seeming powerful and loud enough to sweep us all along with it. It drove our neighbor, Mr. Kramer, to high blood pressure, but my father reveled in it. To me, it was standard. I hardly stirred, even when I slept, as the glass in my windows shook with the house. So-0 I walked up to this new girl, her dark glasses sending my own echoing back at me: 'Amy?' a female's voice came from inside the screen door, sounding tired and flustered. 'What did I do with my checkbook?' The girl on the steps turned her head. 'On the kitchen counter,' she called out- in a stronger voice. 'In the box with the realtor's stuff.' 'The box with... that' The voice came back, rough as if its owner were moving around. the realtor's stuff, hum, honey- babe- I do not think it is here... white T-shirt, blue cut-off age 14 in butt- shorts girl said

scuffed kids with pink socks. And I waited for her to laugh at me or send me away or just ignore me as all the bigger girls did. Oh, wait. The girl turned back and looked at me slightly, shaking her head. 'Hey,' she said to me suddenly, just as I was planning to turn back and head home. 'My name's Amy.' She nodded, 'I'm Hallie,' I said, I remember thinking for the first time how old she seemed for her age, older than me. And I got that familiar fiend-et-te pink-bicycle feeling. Here it is!' Yes... The lady sounded triumphant as if she had revealed the Northwest Way, which we'd just well-read about at the end of the school year. then picked up her purse and leaving just enough space for someone else about the same size, and scooted down a bit on the steps, brushing it off with her hand. facing my house. And then she looked at me and smiled, and I crossed that short expanse of summer grass and sat beside her, we did not talk right away, but that was okay; we had a whole lifetime of talking ahead of us. trying to sound as bold as she had. I had never had a friend with an unusual name; all the girls in my classes were Lisa's and Timmy's, Caroline's, and Kimberly. 'I live over there.' And from that day on, nothing ever looked the same. I pointed across the path, right to my bedroom window. I just sat there with her, staring across the street at my house, my garage, my father pushing the mower past the rosebushes. All the things I had spent my life learning by heart. Nonetheless now, I had Amy. It was from 2:17 am. 'You'll be back just in time for school,' she said, flipping through the brochure again. 'I have a job,' I told her, my final attempt at an excuse. Amy and I were both cashiers at martin Market, the grocery store at the mall down the street from our

neighborhood. 'I can't just take two weeks off.' 'I just wanted to know if it was possible,' she said, more to my father than me, but he just shook his head mildly and kept eating. 'I knew she'd think of every reason not to go.' 'Mr. Avery says it's slow enough that he can get your shifts covered,' she said simply. 'You called Mr. Avery?' I put down my fork. 'Why should I go waste the last two weeks of summer with a bunch of people I don't know?' I spoke. 'Amy and I have plans, Mom. We are working extra shifts to make money for the beach, and we um...' My father, who up until this point had been eating quietly and staying out of it, shot her a look. Even he knew how uncool it was for your mother to call your boss. 'God, Mom' 'Hallie.' She was getting irritated now. 'Amy will be here when you get back. And I do not ask very much of you, right? This is something I want you to do. For me, and I think you will find it for yourself. It is only for two weeks.' 'I don't want to go,' I said, looking at my father for support, but he juss-upport-getically and said nothing, helping himself to get more bread. He never got involved anymore; his job was to placate, to smooth, once it was all over. My father was always the one who crept to my doorway after I had been grounded, sneaking me into one of his special Branden Coffee Milkshakes, which he believed could solve any problem. After the yelling and slamming of doors, after my mother and I talked to our separate corners, I could always count on hearing the whirring of the blender in the kitchen, and then him appearing at my doorway presenting me with the thickest, iciest milkshakes as a peace contribution. when I called. The minute- I hung up with Amy, I called my ma. She was a psychotherapist, an expert on teenage behavior.

On the other hand, even with her two books, dozens of seminars, and appearances on local talk shows advising parents on how to handle The Difficult Years, my mother had not found the solution for dealing with me. 'Hello?'

Strangely, my mother sounded wide awake. It was all part of that professional manner she cultivated: I am capable, I am strong. I am awake. 'The camp bureau,' I said. 'I need you to come to get me.' 'Get you?' she said. She sounded surprised. 'You've still got another week, Hallie.' My father said, "Who is dead?" Who? 'Jack,' I said. 'Oh, goodness.' She sighed, and I heard her telling my father to go back to sleep, her hand cupping the receiver. 'Honey, I know, it is horrible. It is late where are you calling from?' 'Mom?' 'Hallie? What is wrong?' There was some mumbling in the background; my father, moving. 'Honey, you're tired, it's late—' and now she was lapsing into her therapist's voice, a change I could recognize after all these years 'why don't you call me back tomorrow when you have had a chance to calm down. You do not want to leave camp early.' 'My friend.' 'It's Jack, Mommy.' 'Whom?' 'He's dead.' 'Who's dead?'

'Mom, he's dead,' I said again. 'I know, sweetie. It is awful. Nonetheless coming home is not going to change that. It will just disrupt your summer, and there is no point a-hhh.' 'Amy has her mother, Hallie. She will be fine. Honey, it is so late. Which was just what I had predicted when I was dragged off against my will to spend the last two weeks of summer in the middle of the mountains with a bunch of other girls who had no say in the matter either. Sister making Camp,

which was called Camp Believe (my father coined the nickname,) was something my mother had heard about at one of her seminars. She had come home with a brochure she tucked under my breakfast plate one morning, 'Are you with someone? Is your counselor there?' Every time I said- the word Jodi, the camp director who was still standing beside me, put on her soothing face. My throat was swelling up now, hurting with its ache. 'him- More mumbling, this time louder. 'I know, but I want to come home.'

10

'I want to come home,' I said, talking over her. I thought of Amy in her bright kitchen, waiting for me. This was decisive. She needs me... I took a deep breath, and all I could see in my mind was Jack, a boy I hardly knew, whose death now meant everything. 'I need to come home. Amy called to tell me. She did not understand. She never understood. 'Please,' I whispered over the line, hiding my face from Jodi, not wanting this strange woman to feel any sorrier for me. 'Please get me.' 'Hallie.' She announced tiredly now, almost annoyed.

'Just say you will come. He was our friend, Mom.' 'Go to sleep now- and I will call you tomorrow. We can discuss it then.' 'Say you'll come,' I said... not good enough for her to hang up. She was quiet then, and I could picture her sitting in bed next to the sleeping form of my father, in her blue nightgown, the light from Amy's kitchen visible from the window over her shoulder. 'Oh, Hallie,' she said as if I always caused these kinds of problems; as if my friends died every day. 'All

right then. I will come 4- U.' 'You will?' 'I just said I would,' she told me, and I knew this would strain us even further, a battle hard-won. 'Let me talk to your counselor.' 'Okay.' I watched over at Jodi, who was close to dozing off nodding. 'Mommy?' 'Affirmative.' 'Thanks.' Hush... I would pay for this one for a while, I could tell. 'It is all right. Let me talk to her.' I could not sleep for a long time. I thought only of Jack Beth's face, the one I had cast sideways glances at through middle school, the one Amy and I had studied in yearbook after yearbook. Besides later, the one in the picture that was pushed in the mirror in her bedroom, of Amy and Jack at the lake just weeks earlier; water impressive behind them. So-o I handed the phone over to Jodi, then stood outside the door listening as she reassured my mother that it was fine, I would be packed and ready, and what a shame, how awful, so young. Then I went back to my cabin, creeping onto my bed in the dark, and closed my eyes. The way her head rested on his shoulder, his hand on her knee. The way he looked at her, and not at the camera, when I pushed the red button, the flash lit them up in front of me. My mother has a yellow sticky note on it saying, "What do you think?" My first reaction was not much, thank you, as I stared down at the picture of two girls about my age running through a field together hand in hand. The basic gist was this: a camp with the usual swimming and horseback riding and lanyard making, but in the afternoon's seminars and self-help groups on 'Like Mother, Like Me' and 'Noble Pressure: Where Do I Fit In?' There was a whole paragraph on self-esteem and values maintenance and other words I recognized only from the blurbs on the back of my mother's books. All I

knew was that at fifteen, with my driver's license less than three months away, I was too old from camp or values maintenance, not to mention lanyards. did not look incredibly happy when she pulled up at the front office the next afternoon. It was clear by this point that my experience at Sister making Camp had been a complete and utter disaster. 'It will be such a valuable experience,' she said to me that evening over dinner. 'Much more so than sitting around the pool at

Amy's getting a tan and talking about boys.' 'Mom, it's summer,' I said. 'And anyway, it is over.'

11

School starts in two weeks.' But all the milkshakes in the world were not going to get me out of this. So, just like that, I lost the end of my summer. By that Sunday I was packed and riding for three hours into the mountains with my mother, who spent the entire ride reminiscing about her golden camp years and promising me I would thank her when it was over. She dropped me at the registration desk, kissed me on the forehead and told me she loved me, then drove off waving into the sunset. I stood there with my duffel bag and glowed after her, surrounded by a bunch of other girls who did not want to spend two weeks 'bonding' either. I was on what they called a 'scholarship' at Sisterhood Camp, which meant I had my way paid free, just like the four other girls I met whose parents just happened to be therapists. I made friends with my cabin mates, also we complained to each other, mocked all the seminar leaders, and worked on our tans, talking about boys.

Nevertheless, now I was leaving early, drawn home by the loss of a boy I had hardly known. I put my stuff in the trunk of the car and climbed in beside my mother, who said hello and then not much else for the first fifteen minutes of the drive. As far as I was concerned, we had come to a draw: I had not wanted to come, and she did not want me to leave. We were even. But I knew my mother would not see it that way. Lately, we have not seemed to see anything the same. 'So how was it?' she asked me once we got on the High- Way. She had set the cruise control, adjusted the air conditioning, and now seem ready to make peace. 'Or what you saw of it. 'It was ok,' I said. 'The seminars were kind of boring.' 'Hmm,' she said, and I figured that I was pushing it. I knew my mother, though. She would push back. 'Well, maybe if you'd stayed the whole time, you might have gotten more out of it.' 'Maybe,' I said. In the side mirror, I could see the mountains retreating behind us, bit by bit. I knew there were a lot of things she wanted to say to me. She wanted to ask me why I cared about Jack Beth since she had hardly heard me mention him. Or else why I had hated the idea of camping right from the start, without even giving it a chance. Or it was more, like why in just the last few months even the sight of her coming toward me was enough to get my guard up. Why had we gone from best friends to something neither of us could rightly define? But she did not say anything. She authored articles in journals and magazines about our successful relationship and how we had weathered my first year of high school together and spoke at schools and parenting about Staying in Touch with Your Teen. Whenever her friends came over for coffee and complained about their kids running wild or

doing drugs, she would say. 'Hallie and I are just so close. We talk about everything.' 'Mom?' She turned to look at me, and I could almost hear her take a breath, readying herself for whatever I might try next. 'Yes?' 'Thanks for letting me come home,' She turned back to the road. 'It's all right, Hallie,' she said to me softly as I leaned back in my seat. 'It's all right.' Mom- My mother and I had always been close. She knew everything about me, from the boys I liked to the girls I envied; after school, I always sat in the kitchen eating my snack and doing homework while

I listened for her car to pull up. while I detailed everything that had happened from the first song to last On Saturdays when my dad pulled morning shift at the radio station, we had Girls' Lunch Out- so we could keep up with each other., and I only liked fast food and pizza, so we spaced out. She made me eat snails, and I watched her gulp down enjoying it more than she ever would acknowledge countless Big Macs. We had one rule: we always ordered two desserts and shared. Afterward, we hit the mall looking for sales, competing to see who could find the best bargain. She usually won. I always had something to tell her. After my first school dance, she sat with me eating ice cream out of the carton. She loved fancy pasta places. Each summer, my parents and I took a vacation. It was our big splurge of the year, and we always went someplace cool like Mexico or Europe. This year, we took a cross-country road trip to California and then the Grand Canyon, making up songs and jokes- stopping here and there, sucking up the scenery and visiting relatives. My mother and I had a wonderful time; my and the two of us spent time together, father did most of the driving, talking, and listening

to the radio, sharing clothes, as state lines and landmarks passed by My father, and I forced her to eat fast food every day as payback for a year's worth of arugula salad and prosciutto tortellini. We spent two weeks together, bickering sometimes but mostly just having fun, me and my parents on the road. Three excessively important things happened as soon as I got home, though, First, I started my job at Milton's. But suddenly, at the beginning of that summer, something changed. I cannot say when it started exactly. But it happened after the Grand Canyon. Amy and I had spent the end of the school year going around filling out applications, and it was the only place with enough positions to hire us both. By the time I got home from the trip, Amy had already been there for two weeks, so she taught me the ropes. Second, she introduced me to Beth Tabor, whom she had met at the pool while I was gone.

Amy was a cheerleader with a wild streak a mile wide and a reputation among the football team for more than her cheers and famous mid-air splits. She lived a few miles away in the Arbors, a fancy development of Tudor houses with a country club. She threw money at Beth and left us alone to prowl the streets of the Arbors on our way to the pool or sneak out across the golf course at night to meet boys. Which, in turn, led to the third big event that summer, when two weeks after coming home I broke off my dull, one-year romance with Beth, pool, and golf course. Tabor's father was a dentist, and her mother weighed about eighty pounds, chain-smoked Benson and Privets 101's, and had skin that was as leathery as the ottoman in our Livingroom. Beth was my first 'boyfriend,' which meant we called

each other on the phone and kissed sometimes. He was tall and skinny, with thick black hair and a bit of acne. His parents were best friends of mine, and we had spent Friday night together, at our house or theirs, for most of my lifetime. He had been all right for a start. But when I was inducted into the new crazy world of Beth Tabor, he had to go. He did not take it well. He sulked around, glowered at me, and still came over every Friday with his little sister and his parents, sitting stony-faced on the couch as I slipped out the door, yelling good-bye. She was standing by herself, her arms folded tightly across her chest. 'Amy?' I spoke. 'This was a bad idea,' she said. 'We shouldn't have come.' 'But-' And that was as far as I got before Beth Tabor came up behind me, throwing her arms around both of us at once and collapsing into tears. She smelled like hairspray and cigarette smoke and was wearing a blue dress that showed way too much leg. 'Oh my God,' she said, lifting her head to take in me and then Amy as we pulled away from her as delicately as possible. 'It is so awful, so terrible. I have not been able to eat since I heard. I am a wreck.' Neither of us said anything; we just kept walking, while Beth fumbled for a cigarette, lighting it, and then fanning the smoke with one hand. 'I mean, the time that we were together was not particularly great, but I loved him so much. It was just circumstances-' and now she sobbed, shaking her head 'that kept us apart. But he was, like, everything to me for those two months. Everything.' I looked over at Amy, who was studying on the pavement, and I said, 'I'm so sorry Beth.' 'Well,' she said in a tight voice, exhaling a long stream of smoke, 'it is so different when you knew him well. You know?'

'I know,' I said. We had not seen much of Beth since midsummer. I always said I was going to Amy's, but instead, we were usually meeting boys at the pool or hanging out with Beth. My mother was sadder about our breakup than anyone;

I think she had half expected I would marry him. But this was the New Me, someone I was evolving into with every hot and humid long summer day.

12

I learned to smoke cigarettes, drank my first beer, got a deep tan, and double pierced my ears as I began to drift, imperceptibly at first, from my mother. When we got to the church, there was already a line outside the door. Amy had not said much about the entire trip, and as we walked over, she was wringing her hands. 'Are you okay?' I asked her. 'It's simply weird,' she said, and her voice was low and hollow. She had her eyes on something straight ahead. 'All of it.' As I looked up, I could see what she meant. Beth, head cheerleader, was surrounded by a group of her friends on the church steps. She was sobbing hysterically, a red T-shirt in her hands. Amy stopped when we got within a few feet of the crowd, so suddenly that I kept walking and then had to go back for her. After spending a few wild weeks with us, she would get sent off to a combination cheerleading /Bible camp while her parents went to Europe. It was just as well, we figured. There was only so much of ongoing Beth you could take. A

A few days later Amy had met Jack, and the second half of our summer began. We kept following the line into the church, now coming up to Beth. Beth, of course, made a big show of running over to her and bursting into fresh tears, and they stood and hugged each other, crying together.

'It's so awful,' a girl said from behind me. 'He loved Beth so much. That is his shirt she is holding, you know. She has not put it down since she heard.' 'I thought they broke up,' said another girl, and cracked her gum. 'At the beginning of the summertime. But he still loved her. Anyway, that Beth Tabor is so damn shallow,' said the first girl. 'She only dated him for about two days.' Once inside, we sat toward the back, next to two older women who pulled they are There is a picture on my mantel that always reminds me of what my mother and I were then. We are at the Grand Canyon, at one of those overlook sites, with its spread out huge and gaping behind us. We wear matching T-shirts, sunglasses, and big smiles as we pose, arms around each other. We have never been in any picture before or since looked more alike. We have a small nose, the same stance, the same silly smile. We look happy, standing there in the sunshine, the sky spread out blue and forever in the distance. My mother framed that picture when we got home, sticking it front and center on the mantel where you could not help but see it. It was like she knew, somehow, that it would be a relic just months later, proof of another time and place neither of us could imagine had existed: my mother and me, best friends, posing at the Grand Canyon knees aside primly as we slid past them. Amy saw him

first, walking alone up the street, his white dress shirt soaked and sticking to his back.

His head was ducked, and he had his hands in his pockets, staring down at the pavement as people ran past with umbrellas. Amy beeped the horn, slowing beside him.

'Beth!' she called out, leaning into the shower. 'Hey, girl!'

He did not hear her, and she poked me. 'Yell out to him, Hallie.' 'What?' 'Roll down your window some- and ask him if he wants a ride.' 'Amy,' I said, suddenly nervous, 'I don't even know him.' 'So what?' She gave me a look.

13

'It is pouring. Hurry up.' I rolled my window down and stuck my head out, feeling the rain pelting the back of my neck. 'Excuse me,' I said. He did not hear me. I cleared my throat, stalling. 'Excuse me.' 'Hallie,' Amy said, glancing into the rearview mirror, 'we are holding up traffic here. Come on.' 'He can't hear me,' I said defensively. 'You're practically whispering.' 'I am not,' I snapped. 'I am speaking in a perfectly audible tone of voice.' 'Just yell it.' Cars were going around us now as a fresh wave of rain poured in my window, soaking my lap. Amy exhaled loudly, which meant she was losing patience. 'Come on, Hallie, don't be such a wuss.' 'I am not a wuss,' I said. 'God.' She just looked at me. I stuck my head back out the window.

'Beth,' I said it a little louder this time, just because I was angry. 'Beth.'

Another loud exhalation from Amy. I was getting completely soaked. 'Beth,' I said a bit louder, stretching my head completely out of the car. 'Beth!' He jerked suddenly on the sidewalk, turning around, and looking at me as if he expected us to come flying up the curb in our tiny car to squash him completely. Then he just stared, his shirt soaked and sticking to his skin, his hair dripping onto his face, stood, and stared at me as if I were completely and completely nuts. 'What?' he screamed back, just as loudly, 'What is it?' Beside me, Amy burst out laughing, the first time I had heard her laugh since I had come home. She leaned back in her seat, hand over her mouth, giggling uncontrollably. I wanted to die. 'Um,' I said, and he was still staring at me. 'Do you want a ride?' 'I'm okay,' he said across me, to Amy. 'But thanks.' 'Beth, it's pouring.' She had her mom's voice on, one I recognized. As he looked across me, I could see how red his eyes were, swollen from crying. 'Come on.' 'I'm okay,' he said again, backing off from the car. He wiped his hand over his face and hair, water spraying everywhere. 'I'll see you later.'

14

'Beth,' she called out again, but he was already gone, walking back into the rain. As we sat at the stoplight, he cut around a corner and disappeared; the last thing I saw was his shirt, a flash of white against the brick of the alley. Then he was gone, vanishing so easily it seemed like magic – there was no trace. Amy sighed as I rolled up my window, saying something about everybody having their ways. I

was only watching the alleyway, the last place I had seen him, wondering if he had ever been there at all. Up at the front of the church, there were two posters with pictures of Jack taped to them: baby snapshots, school pictures, candid is I recognized from the yearbook. And in the middle, biggest of all, was the picture from the slideshow, the one that had brought cheers in that darkened auditorium in June. I wanted to point it out to Amy, but when I turned to tell her, she was just staring at the back of the pew in front of us, her face pale, and I kept quiet. The service started late, with people filing in and lining the walls, shuffling, and fanning themselves with the little paper programs we Hadad been handed at the door. Beth Gunderson came in, still crying, and was led to a seat with Beth Tabor sobbing right behind her. It was strange to see my generation in this setting; some were dressed up nicely, obviously used to wearing church clothes. Others looked out of place, awkward, tugging at their ties or dress shirts. I wondered what Jack was thinking, looking down at all these people with red faces shifting in their seats, at the wailing girls he left behind, at his parents in the front pew with his little sister, quietly stoic and sad. And I looked over at Amy, who had loved him so much in such a brief time, and slipped my hand around hers, squeezing it. She squeezed back, still staring ahead. The service was formal and short; the heat was stifling with all the people packed in so tightly, and we could barely hear the minister over the fanning and the creaking of the pews. He talked about Jack, and what he meant to so many persons; he said something about God having his reasons. Beth got up and left ten minutes into it, her hand pressed against her mouth as she walked

quickly down the aisle of the church, a gaggle of friends running behind her. The older women next to us shook their heads, disapproving, and Amy squeezed my hand harder, her fingernails digging into my skin. When the service was over, there was an awkward murmur of voices as everyone filed outside. It had suddenly gotten very dark, with a strange breeze blowing that smelled like rain.

Overhead the clouds had piled up big and murky behind the trees. I almost lost Amy in the crowd of voices and faces and color in front of the church. Beth was leaning on Brett Hershey, the captain of the football team, as he led her out. Beth was sitting in the front seat of a car in the parking lot, the door open, her head in her hands. Everyone else stood around uncertainly as if they needed permission to leave, holding their programs and looking up at the sky. 'Poor sweet Beth,' Amy said tenderly as we stood by her car. 'They broke up a while ago,' I said. 'Yes. They did.' She kicked a stone, and it rattled off something under the car. 'But he loved her.' I looked over at her, the wind blowing her hair around her face, her fair skin so white against the black of Beth's dress. The times I caught her unaware, accidentally, were when she was the most beautiful. She looked up at the sky, black with clouds, the smell of rain stronger and stronger. 'I know,' she said softly. 'I know.' The first drop was big, sloshy, and wet, falling on my shoulder and leaving around a dark circle. Then, suddenly, it was pouring. The rain came in sheets, sending people running toward their cars, shielding themselves with their flimsy paper programs. Amy and I dove into her car and watched the water stream down the windshield. I could not remember the last time I had seen it rain so hard.

We pulled out onto Main Street in Amy's Ford Aspire. Her grandmother had given it to her for her birthday in April. It was about the size of a shoebox; it looked like a larger car that had been cut in half with a big bread knife. As we crossed a river of water spilling into the road, I wondered briefly if we would get pulled into the current and carried away like cattle, and Nod in their big shoe, out to sea. 'He loved you, too,' I told her.

Interval: 4 Incest

1

Past Angels- Silverstone, and interbreeding.

The redhead pin-up- is hanging
on the call walls, and the door rushes openly.

We walk... and I am in chains.

Boom, boom!

SMACK!

The lights are bright, in a new room.

~*~

Titus Back- sit- do you feel that you have done your time?

Yes- I can say I will not hurt anyone... 'Rejected!'

Shit- I am up for it... to say his friend outside- yes it sucks 10 years!

Said Titus Back.

I will never see the outside... nothing more than this wall. Um him- the other man in orange said. Outside the bungalow after crossing the covered bridge to his place-the bungalow, remote in a sylvan area, the lovers' cries dropping in and out into the nightfall. I was sitting in my early for thinking of just scaring them- blots everywhere as I go out of the car- whiskey in my hand- yet I was still thinking of what if... my wife- the slut- was with him.

I saw them drunk and giggling, horny as hell- going at it- I knew. No sooner is the door shut than they are all over each other, ripping at clothes, pawing at flesh, mouths locked together. He gropes for her down under, tries to turn her on so much with the rubbing of his hand to make it wet, playing and jiggling the hell out of it. He had more urgent things to do, like getting the blouse on top of her pink dress open, she was not wearing a bra, and her hands on her boobs and showing vagina. He enters her without delay up against the wall. He slams her against the wall, ripping her skirt completely off- he takes her pounding the wall- rolling down to the floor. We hear fabric tears.

She cries out Yes- un- F*CK me hard- hard, hitting her head against the wall but not caring, as he lifts and drops her hard on his man-ness- crushing her against him fixed, clawing his back from her young loving lust, shivering hard to

the over and over endings, with the feelings running through her- like his hand in her long dark hair.

He carries her across the room with her legs wrapped around him, they just freak! They fall onto the bed jumping not stopping for the paints to come off him. She arches, moaning, He can hear them freaking from here. He raises a bottle of the shin and knocks it back. The radio plays softly with the door open to the car, painfully romantic, taunting him: I will always love you- He opens the glove compartment and pulls out the gun... wrapped in her underwire.

That pares he keeps with him- freaked her when she was 14 under an angel oak tree. He lays it in his lap and unwraps it carefully revealing a .38. Greasy, murky, black in color, and ever so evil feeling in his hot hands. fumbling with his fly- he jacks it- saying this is it... as well as we drove down a wooded path some now in the car- I got back in I- could not- I could not do that to them, the sounds of rutting passion growing fainter as I walked back- I was sickened by it- yet let her go, circulating now with the night sounds of crickets and hoot owls... and the thump of the motor turning over-and the music soft it was our song on the radio... play as the tears ran. Titus Back- There's a n*gger- like me in every state prison in America, I guess like I am the one that can get what you need... alcohol if that is your thing- crack it you sniff- and drugs if you a dumb-ass- yet I am Five and Ten- I got it all you will either love or hate. A 1938 Ford, one out of many cars for this high roller- a toothbrush- or something to hide from sickness or dig with. Parked in

a clearing, even if it was the year 1994. It was too clear I had this car... and the drive... but I had to see it myself. With my own eyes... that is when you get to see me for the first time- Bradley Delgado, 19 slicked back hair- good looking she said, three-piece suit, a hotshot- baseness man. Under normal situations a well-thought-of, solid citizen; barely hazardous, even pussy to some. But these conditions are far from customary. He is unkempt, yet stuffy, and very- very smashed- high on something too. A pipe smoldering in his mouth. His eyes bright blue- yet stoned and itchy, flighty, and hard, are engrossed in the small house up the path- he was.

He grabs a box of bullets and chin smocks, feeling he is seeing a movie of his wife doing a scene he should be in. Spills them everywhere as he loads the gun for his head- or there- he was not sure yet, all over the seats and floor- this ran down. lovers' moans. He takes another shot of bourbon courage, then- clumsy is his hands fiddling with it. He picks bullets off his lap and zips it up, loading them into the gun, even thinking about blowing his dick off for not getting it in this woman tonight of ever after now- he was in love with her... only... so much so he wants her dead... one by one, systematic, and grim. 6 in the chamber- not 8. He just stands and listens, overwhelmed/confused. He does not look like much of an assassin now with the look in his glass eyes- that have the glimmer of the streetlight in them; he was the only one where- he thought the man on a dirt path in the woods, tears streaming down his face, a loaded gun held loosely at his side- he was going to end them and him in one go around. A pitiful character- at this point, not this man at all. He starts up the path, unsteady on his feet. The closer he gets, the

louder the lovemaking becomes. Louder and more hyperactive. The lovers are reaching a climax, their sounds of passion degenerating into rhythmic gasps and grunts. Oh god um- ah ...oh- YES- YES- Bradley lurches to a stop, pay attention. We hear languorous laughter, moans of satisfaction. Oh god...that's so-o good...you are the young hot girl who cries out in orgasms after orgasms. His gaze and goes back to the cottage- looking in love pouring out of her. Bang- Bang- Bang- Bang- Bang- and 3 more. I ran- not sure what I had done- was confused high and drunk. He shuts off the radio and is not able to handle it. With Unexpected quietness, except for the distance of feeling, I did this to my love- and her freak- opens the door and steps from the car- saying- FREAK YOU BITCH. The one next does not even, I said so. Its night started- out. His patent leather shoes crunch on gravel, and he rolls steps- in a sexy way.

Loose bullets stun and toss onto the dirt. The shin jar drops and cracking glass in fragments unstop of the undies and the evidence. Framing me here... Stone Cassel- from the 1700's old where they still hang you if they feel the need to. Bradley Delgado came to me in EBENSBURG in 1994- to blast and bust over the girl he was banging. The sound slams into his brain are numbing to the pounding he is hearing. He shuts his eyes tightly, wishing the sound would stop. It finally does, dying away like a distress signal until all that is left is the shallow wheezing and puffing of post-coitus. The best... the best I ever had... the girl said... as he was looking from the car... (cut) In the COURTROOM the day of freedom ends and I am on the stand, at the courthouse. A large oval courtroom- the wind blows and the

windows rattle and whistle- hauntingly. THE 12 JURY listens to the man stammering about- like a gallery of dummies on exhibition, pale-faced I am and cold to them- some would call me chilling. Bradley Delgado is on the witness stand, hands folded, suit and tie pressed, hair meticulously combed- oiled. Non-sympathetic when I did not do it! District attorney Mr. Frampton describes the hostility you had with your wife the night she was murdered as that of a nut job - quoting. He expresses in soft ways kind to the learner, dignified tones: Bradley how would you say it went- It was very acrimonious. She said she was glad I knew about the a-fire, that she loathed all the sneaking around. That she just wanted to hurt me- She said she wanted a divorce here in this town D.A. - What was your answer? I articulated I would not grant a reply to something I had no say in. D.A. - He speaks to his notes- flipping through the loss pages. I will see you in Hell before I see you with that blanking man. Those were the words you used, Mr. Delgado, rendering to the testaments of your fellow citizens in your parts of town. I said- If you and they say so-

o. I do not remember I was not at the right wits at the time. I was upset- confused- drunk and high. D.A. - What transpired after you and your wife disputed? Okay- She packed a handbag and went to be with Mr. Orillie. D.A. - Homer Orillie. The billionaire that owns the Odalis Hills Country Strip Club, half the town, and part of the Ebensburg railroad. The gentleman you had lately shared was her lover and sex partner- would you say, lovers.

No- I would not- what would you say it was- I cannot say that word in the courtroom. Yet you get it NO? Is that what you want to hear? Do not be smart with me- the D.A said. I nodded slightly- Did you follow her? Yes- I saw them at the bar I was already intoxicated- as they were also- Yes- I decided to drive to Mr. Orillie's summer household and threaten them. They were in the house unclothed, so I parked my car in the round drive out... and waited for her too well I thought to come out. D.A. With what purpose? I am not certain. I was confused. Drunk. I craved to frighten them. D.A. You had a gun with you? Yes- I had it- but I am not sure what I did with it... I am not sure. I was muddled. Stoned. Mostly I wanted to scare them. So, I would say- Yes. I did- I must've... how do you not remember killing your wife and love- he asks- with prissiness.

D.A. When they arrived, you went into the house and blasted their heads with lead? No- I think I have been clear here, that- I did not- and went back into my car to weigh them out. I was sobering some after they looked in on them- and the long walk back to the car. I apprehended she was not worth it- yet I would love her always. IS THAT SO- SO- MUCH SO TO GIVE AN EXECUTION? No- I said that not it at all... that I would let it go... what do you mean by that- the 5th I said. NO comment! guilty! He shouted in my face the spit ran down my face! D.A. Quickie- style it was while there were in doggie style- something that called for a divorce indeed. Not something a married couple does- That was the testament- that the others said to happen over the way- A .38 caliber divorce, wrapped in an underwire to muffle the shots, isn't that what you mean? And then you shot her and

her love lover- right in the hand- stop in re-load 5 times! That hot blood passion hates there- folks. A love crime- if I have ever seen one! I did not. Along the way, I stopped and threw myself out the window over the just passed the covered bridge and I got back in the car and drove to a hotel to nap it off. I feel I have been noticeably clear on this point to you- sir. D.A. Um- Where I get blurred, in your twisted story is where the undertaker said your wife lay dead for a week rotting in the arms of her lover. And then you say you did, not? pierced with hundreds of .38 caliber bullets and gases. Does that strike you like a whimsical twist of fate, Mr. Delgado, or is it just me and my thinking?

2

You claim you threw your gun into the creek /river after the homicides took place. That is convenient. Softly speaking he said- Yes- Yes. It does- but... D.A. - I am apologetic, Mr. Delgado, I do not think the jury heard that. Say it- YES IT DOES- you see even he says it. D.A. - I find it unequivocally inconvenient that the gun or knife was not found and examined to match up or that all the blood and guts were washed away from the bodies. YOU COULD and SICK- just by that way you said that sir. Why did you toss it? I was not sure what I would do with it, that is why. She had it coming, no? No- comment- I said. D.A - Grotesque concurrence. IF YOU SAY SO- and they, I said. Me- That was the actuality of it all. D.A. - Do you evoke all the testimonies? Me- It is what they say not I! We drained that river for three weeks, and nary a gun or knife, or underwire were found. NARY- 1! So,

no comparison can be made between your gun and the bullets, or the knife, and the holes in the face and breast- and the cuts on the virginal areas- and the gun residue on the panties. Occupied look at the photos of this all-and what was taken from the gory- bloody sailors covered stiffs of the preys. Of this could blood animal- That's also fitting, isn't it, Mr. Delgado?

3

Me- It is the truth. Nary a gun was found. People, you have overheard all the proof, you know all the details. We have suspicion of the act of the crime. So-o what do you say for yourself? NOTHING! I said, with a faint, bitter smile, or do what you want- my life was over when she passed. Meanwhile- you say your side- I will speak mine- I am innocent of this corruption, sir, I find it decidedly inconvenient, that the gun was under no circumstances found by your men. The D.A. holds the jury enthralled with his final synopsis-

We have footprints, and fingerprints- we have his semen in her body- we have his hair found on her- what more do you need. Tire tracks. Shots distributed and spared all over the lover's room- their naked body showing it all do you see all the shales on the ground, which bears his fingerprints. A broken jar, equally with fingerprints. Most of all, we have a lovely, exquisite young 17-year-old girl and her older lover lying dead in each other's arms.

They succumb to temptation. But then again was their sin so unlimited as to value a death verdict of assassination?

Looking down along line 12, moving from one JUDGE to all the faces and eyes showing that it was all over for me. A revolver holds six shells, not eight. Some of you do not get that- the ladies in the room. I yield to you this was not a mercurial crime of lust! No this was revenge- of not getting what he wanted- which is something this man does not like- by the ways of it. - Do you have to get your way all the time, don't you? He asked me- not necessarily I said. Like I said this may well be unwritten, if not excused. Nope, this was a payback of a much more inhuman and pitiless nature.

Contemplate! - mayhem! 100 per victim! 50/50. I suspect your answer to that would be yes- no? No comment was given- I have no further questions- you are done. Why did you shout yourself in the head instead? I was not that crazed... yet you do that to her and him- I see life being taken here from them as also you. And while you think about that, think about this... your ass belongs to where you are going! He picks up a revolver, spins the cylinder before their eyes, and pops the sound of it... in my face holding it to my head. As if a fair barker spinning a wheel of fortune- to see if it would blow my head off for what I did not do.

It only would tack one shout to the head he said- like this as he made the gun pop at mine- see it is not hard to do this... what do you will say about that? A gasp was made... saying umm hum... That means he fired the gun empty over and

over and over... and then stopped to reload at direct range- a cram so heinous I can wrap my head around it! And this man there your dad sits there for your behalf- sick- dad you are not right either- the only one on his said- the rest of the town heated him for being who he was... I knew it was all one-sided.

Again, and repeatedly! Many bullets and slashes per nude lover... right in the head, chest, and body look at the girl's virginal wounds- come one now. An old woman JURORS shiver at the sight of it. As she holds the black and white photograph- did you see this woman over there miss say your name- lock him up and throw away the keys- I am done talking- do it. You, people, are all decent, God- dreading Christians and such- like me. But I say that is not good enough- do we hang him or let him rot for it- ROT- ROT- ROT- there was talk among the people in the room, you know what to do.

7

By the power vested in me by the State of Pennsylvania, I hereby order you to serve two life sentences, back-to-back, one for both of your victims. So be it- tack this man out of my room- said- Layhe. Voices- say he is- Guilty- Guilty- Guilty- I stand before them all saying thanks for your time. - get out of here- they said to me... THE JUDGE aristocracies down at me with fury, he said- You assault with your ways- and actions and I better than your attitude- I take you like an arctic cold and brutal, curl fella, Mr. you make my skin could and crawling just looking in those blue could stonily eyes. It drains the color of my skin just to look at you-

not caring- and your cold icy ways. He wraps his gavel as we then all get up cheering- but I did not. It was all over for me... I knew- it... (Cut)

Titus Back- He slips Klit a pack of smokes, smooth sleight-of-hand. Making his way in for rejection, the AN IRON-BARRED DOOR part as I walk in the room. I must sit, (sit) he said- and do nicely- trying not to slouch. The chair is uncomfortable with rusty metal. They say you have served 30 years of a life sentence for your paperwork. Boy- you feel that you have done your part. That you have done enough time no- for whom and what you are and did? Do you feel transformed... by your time? I am no longer a hazard to any younglings- Absolutely, sir. Unquestionably. I have learned my lesson- if - if that is what you want to know. I can in all conscience say I am an altered man. You are not a man you are a boy always remember that- oh well yes sir. It said that you took a white girl- by force- and then killed her. Is that right? It was- I was young- and dumb-you are still dumb to remember that BOY! That is God's truth. - N*gger's just like you do not have souls- the man said- um yes sir, I see that. No doubt about it, I get it. I said- there was no hope here. The men just stare at me like I should have gotten the chair- and not breathing the same air. The One stifles girl a yawn- saying get this meat out of my sight and lock 'IT' up. She was joking- yes maybe- no- shout it before it gets away, she said.

A big rubber stamp slams down: 'OVERRULED' in red cap ink. And then signed off by all the whites in the room. I get up piss in my mind yet do not

show it- I get out and there this pain in the ass... Klit said- do you have those smocks (get the F*CK out of my face white boy you are making me look bad to my man.) I am looking over the courtyard with a gun pointed at my head- I no.

Whoever named this place The Little Rock was not kidding- said one of the men standing with is a group. I turned 55 yesterday. Some birthday- I got. When is your birthday? I asked- Klit's (I do not know.) I do not remember it- Stan- Jeez, what juvenile life did you have? I said- short- and fast. There is always the possibility that some asshole will be insulted, isn't there? Do not say much- that pissed him off I said? Yes- he is not good at it- he is pissed I said. What do you want, boy? - He said to me... I moved on... The horns when off and there was cheering and shaking on the fences, boys and men saying nasty shit- as we got all whole new set of pussy in- to freak within the night.

It is dusking out now as the bus pulls in with the man above us with their guns and are dicks- saying run I will blast it off. High stone walls topped with guards, and winding concertina wire, set off at intermissions by looming guard towers like a castle. The glow of the little windows seems eerie and cold as I shiver my way down into the gates of the massive cold, damp, and spooky, building.

It was not more than a day, that went by this week man walked up to me saying- I can get you Damn near anything, within reason. A bottle of brandy to celebrate your teen's high school graduation. Or first freak- or cards with girls on them- or underwear without holes. -I said to him Can you get me a BRADSHAW

CRANDELL 40s Redhead Nude pin-up drawing? Of the girl- sorry to say I do not have her riding shoved in me under short but yes, I can get you the cute little thing there you see on screen.

It has just turned 1940, and that is when he first came to me, he was not much of a man nor was he a boy. I did not see much in this sick with the gold fork up his ass! Blunt end first- or so the boys said.

Look at all the cons- hundred in the courtyard. Playing catch, shooting crabs, chatting with each other, making deals. Fighting, shaking, and ass freaking. Isometrics old-fashioned. A stark room waits beyond. As the big black door slides open with enormous clinking sounds.

8

I have never seen a shitter so sorry-looking shit load in all my pussy eating life- said the simple man- as I walked past. a long table. An empty chair faces them. We are now in six HUMORLESS MEN sit side by side at saying dumb shit, and place bets on who was freaked over the night before, like the night before- my first night the bet was on the fat black guy- that was killed for spitting in the guard's face. And taking a dump on the floor on the way in as he was dragged by his balls. Oh yes, they hose you down and march you in ass naked- I remember that night also.

(Back) [move up if you want]

Titus Back- come in, put on his cap, and wait by the chair- seeing me. I emerge into fading daylight, sprawl unglamorous through the commotion, worn cap on his head, exchanging hellos, and doing the minor trade. He is an important man here; I saw for a black man I was okay with... (yet was not 100% sure.)

9

I gaze around, rejected by prison walls. I came to EBENSBURGH Prison in early 1940- Titus Back for murdering his young girl and the fella she was banging. The bus lurches forward, RUMBLES through the gates. I would call the man pedantic- said Titus Back. DAN, captain of the guard, slams his baton into Bradley's back- and then into another man's back for asking too many questions. Bradley goes to his knees, gasping in pain. BOOS and SHOUTS from the onlookers. The TOWER GUARD All clear- he yells! LOOKOUTS method the bus with carbines. You can see all the faces looking sad- as the door jerks open- by Dan from the outside. And unlocked- with a key. Dan Flakier, captain of the guard, slams his baton into my back hard, and then into my adulthood. Bradley holds against him one of the Men in front of me, almost dragging him down to the ground killing him. The new PUSSYs debark, bound together single file in 2 rows, discontinuous sourly at their environs. I fell to my knees also by this man pulling me downward with him- I thought I was next, gasping in pain. BOOS and SCREECHES from the listener's older inmates. Titus Back- said- it came to me to be known within the walls, he was a big-time businessman- making more money-

than I could dream of a real estate investor- within oil and gas- some time shoving the money down his pants. The same could be said for his girl too... respectable labor, and education for a gentleman as undeveloped as he was at the field when you deliberate on how unadventurous this is these days. They met in high school, she was all he wanted, and vis-vers-a they fed off one another's- it was a sick unholy- and unhealthy relationship.

10

Takin' bets today- yep? Titus Back- pulls out his notepad and pen. Tolerate Wide-ranging? Pope shit in the woods? Smoke or coins, bettor's choice. The coin you can get smokes with coin- dumb ass. Titus Back- There they are, boys- what puss- is going to get freak- and cry for mommy. The betting game when one... picking the pussy, that they wanted to freak over. Flakier- get on your feet- and stand like a man- PUSSY- before I freak the said out of you! So-o freaking ass hard you never walk again. They were sitting in a tight little rower looking up high over the town. Odile- I would Never- ever seen such a sorry-er- looking' pile of cow shit in my days. Hailer- Comin' from you, kid, you being so beautiful and all... that is cute- what did you change his clothes too? You want to suck my dick? No- this one here does, and he tapped- Titus Back on the head in form of him.

That lanky sack of shit, third from the front- is the puss-pony I want. He will be the first. Look at this pussy going to town sucking on that dick! Said- Stan- I hear this black man said this as I went past him. High roller. Who is your pussy

BITCH? Jacker- Smokes I want- he was puffing on two at once- there was one in his ear shoved. Put me down for their packs. Stan- OH Bullshit. I will take that freak on hardcore. Grolh- Me too. Other hands go up saying that it is the sack of piss and shit that we will hit. I see this black man- iotas the names- as I walk past now even slower with the line that I am changed to. Stan- You're out some coinage, boy. Take my word for it boy I will win. You are so smart, you call it- I did. Stan- I like even for a n*gger! But your puss is going down and going to be freaked. Like this one's ass last night by Dan the Gard- the guy's snicker! For it may have been true... ha! I say that flabby-floppy freak right there the- lard-ass- that should have a tuba playing with every step he makes... let us see... (Okay) 11th from the front. Put me down for a quarter roll. You can say that small thing in your slack is that con roll can you look at some of these ladies coming in. Funny- asshole! Said one of them. on Fat Ass- got it! You are out some man... That is five cigarettes and a half roll of -cone. Any takers- on this white big hairy ball-sucking fat ass!?

More hands go up and more. I look around- and the others are paraded along, forced by their handcuffs that are changed to small baby steps, recoiling under the barrage of boos and yells. Saying all kinds of freaked up shit. The Oldtimers are shaking the fence and the pussy is looking scared of getting freaked over hard by them- you can see the lust in their eyes by some, trying to make the Johnny-come-latelies shit their pants. Some of the new fish shout back, but mostly they look terrified. Especially that man I came to call Bradly.

Hey there puss you want to suck this- one said- and I look at him with aw-ah-gross on my face, Titus Back- I must confess I did not think much of um- The first time I laid eyes on him walking in the stone-cold rot your brain out place. He might 'a be important on the outside of these walls, yet not here on the inside... nonetheless, in here, he is just a little pussy looking to get freaked in prison grays by horny man. Like I said- it looks like shift gust could upset him to the mud below his shaking knees and feet. Affirmatively- this was my primary impression of the gentleman.

Sid- Watch it- say, Boy? The little fella on the end sure got it. The crier tonight- that is going to lose his mind. It always happens at night when someone is going to give out. And become the pussy! There is not one man here- that has not wanted freedom or their mommy! Long dark cold nights- they make you think of all that you did and did not do right in your life... it well dives you over the edge like most on the first night here. I stake half a pack- for my stick with the fork up his anus. Any takers? One the done meat?

Stan- wow- wow- wow- that is such a rich bet. Come 'on, boys, who is going to prove me mistaken? Some of the boy's hands went up and some were making gestures too, I got the finger! Guys- brave ass wipes- no? BRAVE! persons, ten clouds of smoke apiece and a half roll. That is, it, gentlemen, this boy is in and getting de-lazar and freak in their faces- hoses them down- and the bets are closed. Me- I pocket the notepad- kissing it for the win. A VOICE comes over

the P.A. speakers: saying get inside it in time for lock-up. Old music runs in my mind from my free days back with I was a young black boy- sinking into bars, to see bands and key players.

11

WARDEN Cameron Marquez ambles us to look at his all and holy ways, all neutral man stands before his greatness- naked as the day we came out of our mommas in blood and goo- cover in shit. A complete BIBLE freak- this man is and one that I am sure is not all and holy- just by the way he grins too much for my liking- I do not trust his type- you will get freaked hard in the ass- like with the feel of it being a steam train... hauling ass into the tight hole. Yet some of these guys here love, that feeling... they have eyes on me now. I see church ways of being a fake pester type- angel pin in hand- marking off are names that mean jack shit to him. Welcome TO EBENSBURGH YOUR FREAKING DICK belongs to me! You are going to be sucking it long and hard from this day one- you will learn this fast- or have your balls cut off- got it? YES, sir! The other shit- you get from my man here. This is Mr. Flakier; captain of the guard you have met. And feel in your adulthood already as if you were all welcomed by becoming ladies on these walls. I am Mr. Marquez, the warden. You will get this if we feel you are out of line... the Billy club to the dick! He assesses the newcomers with flinty eyes and glare and odium. Understand- Yes! You are sinners and pussy come, that is why they sent you to me- now it is my job to eat you all out for this. 'He could eat an inferno and

piss out ice cubes!’ WARDEN- castle rock – some call this place- we have the lighthouse on the top there is no way out-and even so-o those that would get that far would be shot on the spot in the head- this place is never busted out of- were the best in the state! - and the most malicious. (Talking) Rule number

1: no blaspheming. 2 No betting off- or shitting or pissing in the cells of the sink in E bloc- there will be no fighting- or sexual cantatas- The caption rolled his eyes like yes right- hypocrite! For I knew by the looks this was so backward... even this man here was getting it in the ass! - His wife that he would not stop talking about being everything she was not... I will not have the Lord's name taken in vain in my prison. The man said it out loud- The other directions you will figure out as you go along, as stated. Any questions? Where do we shit, piss, and eat? It was said there were no bathrooms in the 23-hour lock-up- so-o what- were and how? A gangly- lanky man said.

As I was getting firehose down in front of all the men next to me- push and shoved hard- like fresh meat. I hear the others, that were here long then I returning to their cell blocks for the evening count- and then lights out. The new pussies are marched in feeling less than manly. Guards unlock the shackles. We are all stopped, and we lose all that was our free life as we strip down- alone with the chains drop away from our now cold bodies, clanking to the stone floor under us. Hey, you numb-nuts look here- hey look here- he did not he hit him in the dick with a bully club- saying do not disrespect me- FREAK!! Keep your eyes looking

at my quires. You- yes you- suck this man dick! - what you heard me, and he did with a gun at his dick or else. I was the first man in the shower! With all their dicks flapping in my eyes! Some were just freaking gay looking at me.

It was not even my 2nd day here and I asked the man, that can get it for you if- hey Titus Back- Can you get me a coal bucket- a gas lamp- hard hat- for on my table- and a mining hammer, with the caw- in my room? and some old hand tools just to remember- my life before I hit it big. Also, I want you to get me the ID mining tag that was mine number 3700. Funny all this was in plain sight... I was not hiding it. Except for the hammer- that I head in a fake bottom in the coal bucket that I made from an old coffee can- and dripped in... run some mud- around it and it looks right- that graduate would never no. Titus Back, I was okay with it for it was memorabilia of his life- that I got smuggled in from his home- that they were selling off. Shit, he wanted- and by what he said it was all worn down- nonlethal- and not usable- Freak- I did not care I was making my 30% upcharge. "Why the hammer- it is small- I said, planning to go somewhere he said. Ha- no- you can get out of this place, and I sure I would need more than this thing- I don't even have a plan too, after what I did- I belong here what do you think? I have not made up my mind yet... I am fine with you if you are fine with me- sure- we are all the same in my book, all the cons. Why? I did not kill this girl- yet you did the man he said- with a giggle- ha- nope- I should have thought- and he laughed harder- I said I was framed. Do you, do it? yes, he said- why- I can say yet... I need to see what I think

of you- sure enough, I said back and walked with style away- not caring about anything- in this wall and remembering her in my mind.

12

FLACKIER Off with their clothes! Is standing ass naked- And I did not say take all day doing it, did I?

Flacker rams the tip of his club into ALL the con's JUNK they are all gasping for breath- and grappling. yet again some are blowing chunks, the man falls to his knees or is doubled over. (Now eat it- he said) CON- When do we shit and get food to live off?" Cued by Marquez's glance, Flackier steps up to the con and yells right in his face: saying what is and not permitted. FLAKIER- Your give shit and you take this shit, and we say when you shit! And you sleep in your shit! Got it- shitter! YOU are ball-sack-sucking dick junky- Tit- smacking pussy licker- MOTHERFREAK! Flackier takes his place at Marquez's side again. The men shed their clothes. Within seconds, all stand naked. Softly: MARQUEZ Any other questions NOW? Some look up and take yet another hit. He said I believe in self-control and the holy spirit. Here, you will receive both, if only you believe that you can have that self-control. He is throwing the bible- down to the floor at their feet, saying- you all going to hell for what you have done in your life- if your choice to fall; to this book you can die here with the hope of making it up... yet I do not feel you can at this point. Put your faith in God- Your DICK belongs to this man here, and he points to his caption. Welcome! The con gets a huge scoop of white

delousing powder thrown all over them. Flackier shoves all of us CONs into a steel cage, that has the spray jets in it to be disinfected- open at the front- with a man and woman girls looking up at us. TWO GUARDS open with a fire hose, that sprays fixed in the face and body- hitting like knives on the sick barning from industrial soap. The con is slammed against one another at the back of the cage, sputtering and hollering. Moments later, the water was cut, and the cones yanked out. And given a number- I can see it for my eyes are red balls of blood- from all that was slashed into them. FLAKIER- Delouse that piece of shit 5 more times in the eyes for killing a 17-year-old girl, that he freaked at 14! The EXECUTOR slides a short stack of items through the slot- like a top and pants and that was it- prison clothes- no underwire- yet a Bible. (That is nice) and I get my teeth chipped out. All the men are processed quickly haling ass- a blast of water in the face and hands flying all over me in places that only my wife touched by their RN, powder- and shit, clothes, and a Bible... A naked CON I am to them, as I step before a DOCTOR and get a cursory exam. A penlight is shining in his eyes, ears, nose, and throat. I sit on the aluminum table ass sticking. Gasping and coughing, blinking powder from his eyes, I rub some she grabs my adulthood with a fast cold hard grip, and she said- flopping shit around- I even got penetrated- with her finger. (D block for a week to tack fact with the others that have Genital warts- or on that line.) I have never seen so much gross cock in my face she said. Save this shit and get it over with Caption said... I have a job to do too. RN. Bend over or I do it for yah! (You going to jack me too I said) Funny I got yet more teeth out that day. D block is the lowest level

above us, and that was home for a few days. Me- the con does what he is asked. A GUARD with a penlight in his teeth spreads his cheeks, peers, up to his ass, and nods- do you want to hold out your tongue, I said; to her, as she was in the front. Three tiers to a side, concrete, and steel, gray and imposing. Bradley is next up. Cute she said- that is a new one- He gets the same treatment, and she looks at me like why- he not bad looking- (almost flirting.)

The naked tenderfoots are shivering on hard wooden chairs, clothes on their laps, Bibles open. CHAPLAIN- yells- Bradley and the others marched in, still naked, carrying their clothes and Bibles. He- makes me lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restored my soul... no spit and piss on it! For this is what you have been doing in your life. New walking to their new homes- holding their top, pants, and shoes, The CONS in their cells greet them with SCOFFS, HECKLINGS, and HILARITY. U- HOOOOW- Hay- Sorry your daddy dicks your Momie- One by one, the new men are shown to their yelling and marching to his clap- cells and locked in with a CLANG OF STEEL.

TITUS BACK- when they put you in that cell when those bars slam home, that is when you know it is for real.

The first night's the toughest, no doubt about it. They march you are in half-blind from that delousing shit, your so-o ass naked as the day you are born, Bible shouts on your dick to hide it- also reading- what you have done wrong, skin

burning like piss in the eyes, ass hole hurting not able to shit they throw on you...
into rot.

Bradly is led past and given a cell after our row. Titus Back watches from his cell, cigarette dangling from his finger's arms slung over the crossbars. nothing left but all the time in the world to think. A long cold season in hell stretching out ahead... The old life is blown away in the bat of an eye... shit! Yes, pissed it away... Sam listens to the CLANGING below. He watches Bradly and a few others being brought up to the 2nd tier. SAM- Somebody always breaks down crying. Most new fish come close to madness the first night. It happens every time- every nightfall. The only question we have is, who is it going to be? SAM- I had my chance on Bradly... It is as good a thing to bet on as any, I for one conjecture, here where your life is shit.

The bars slam home... He gazes around at his new surroundings, taking it in. He slowly begins to dress... He hiatuses, listening. Sam lies on his bunk below us, tossing his softball toward the Stan and catching it again- and then to Klits. SAM- I remember my first night. It seems a long time ago now.

FOOTPATHS he way to me- sterling- in a roll- approaching near, easy-going, resonating in a hollowly on the stone courtyard- looking over the lights of the dusking day. Bradly is alone in his cell, clutching his clothes. GUARD- That's lights out! Good night, ladies. Darkness now. Silence. Sam looms from the darkness, leans on the bars. Listen. Waits- From somewhere below comes faint,

ghastly tittering. The prissy grade looks the rows toward Sam's cell. The lights bump off in series. The guard exits, footsteps reverberating away from me and them.

13

Klit's, I know some big old dick-suckers- bull queers, like me who would love to make your social contact... in the shower tomorrow especially they would love to see if they can find that dick of yours and wiggle it around. The white schmaltzy butt of yours... Sam waits at the bars. Smoking. Listening. He cranes his head, peers, down toward Bradly's cell. Nothing. Not a peep.

A big VOICES drift through the cell block, taunting:

Pus- puss- pussy- You're going to like it here, new pussy. A whole lot... You are takin' this down now is not- you... pussy- the man said, flapping his dick around at me, new pussy? Going to be a quiz later. An evil stone growth on the Maine landscape. The moon hangs low and baleful in a dead sky. The headlight of a PASSING TRAIN cuts through the night. Camel toe hey you- oh, Fat-Ass puss over there I can see you. Talk to me, baby boy. I know you are in there- I see your roles. I can hear you breathing and are you going to blow a kiss my way? Now, do you not eavesdrop on these nitwits, hear? CELLBLOCK FIVE midnight you can hear this all... A CELLBLOCK GUARD strolls into the frame of sight. They are all not too bright, are they the Gard said- (somebody's LAUGHS and losing their mind about how they won their bet.) Keep it down. Fresh pussy...fresh pussy...fresh

pussy...fresh pussy... OH, GOD! I DON'T HAVE ITS PLACE HERE! I WANNA GO HOME to momma! The mommy's boy fat freak- IT WAS said. That looked like he ate too many Italy style meals. AND Its FAT-ASS- dick suck in 5 THAT CRIED FOR MOMMY! NO RACE BOYS I GOT UM BY THE HAIRY BALLS. Boy- Boy- hey gay boy- This is not such a bad place. I will introduce you around, make you feel right at home. Hey, see this, it is going on you! He- he- he. Fat-pussy suck- lets out a LOUD HOWL of despair: as he was taken in all ways. What Christ is this happen and shit- freaks? GUARDS pour in, led by Flackier himself. 'He took the Lord's name in vain!' Shut the freak up-or you will eat your bible 'I'm-telling' the warden!' You will be telling' um with your tongue shoved up your ass, and then pulled out your nose- if you do! The lights bump on hard 2 by 2. Fresh pussy...fresh pussy...fresh pussy...fresh pussy... AND Its FAT-ASS- dick sucker- The place goes nuts. Fat Ass- dick come goo- galloper throws himself screaming against the bars. FLAKIER- What's your glitch you fat freaking barrel of monkey CUM? The entire block starts CHANTING: 'I WANNA- want to GO-a go HOME! I WANT MY MOTHER.' PLEASE! THIS AIN'T TRUE! I AIN'T ACTUAL TO-a BE HERE! NOT-a I am! FLAKIER - I am not going to count to one- you all shut the freak up - for a bedtime story! The big freak keeps weeping and sniveling. Flackier draws his baton, gestures to his men by ripping him up and down. And shoving the bully club up his ass- and then in the teeth- Open it- freak for saying all this and making my day hard. Flackier arrives at Fat-Ass' cell, bellowing through the bars: A GUARD unlocks the cell. Flackier pulls Fat-Ass out and starts beating

him with the baton, brutally raining blows. Fat-Ass falls, tries to crawl- out of the open shit room. A GUARD unlocks the cell. Flackier pulls Fat-Ass out and starts beating him with the baton, brutally bucketing blows. Fat-Ass falls, tries to crawl yet one more time. The place goes dead silent. All we hear now is the dull WALLOP-THUMP-STRIKE of the baton and sex act you do not want to see in your life. Fat-ass passes out. Flackier- gets in a few more licks and finally stops. ‘I had your mother and that how you were made! She was not that great, other than giving head- the puss was too wide! For your sister- coming out! And see this dick of mine it is bigger than yours!’ ‘Sh-h ass wipes. The screws will hear...’ ‘hey you- hey- Pussy-e-e pussy-e-e-e-e...’ SAM The boys always go puss digging with first timers... besides, they do not quit till they finger freak, someone, into their dick-sh ways. PUSSY-cons go soundlessly irrational in his cells- yanking and pulling throwing shit at Klits over the way. Pussy fat freak is crying, trying not to hyperventilate. One man paces like a caged animal... another sits concerning his cuticles bloody...a third is moping noiselessly...a fourth is dry-heaving into the toilet... this PUSSY went where he was dunked in the shit covered bull- by the girl and he inhaled so much water and prissy file-ness I do not want to say- other than the fact that he died and we all say as he dragged his body back in and made a show of it, yet no gave a shit I lost money and smokes that is all we cared about. The VOICES keep on, sly and creepy in the dark... PUSS- Puss Possie! The man says as Fat Freak was hanging over the rail dead. FLAKIER- Get this tub of shit covered and come down to the sanatorium. (Nobles around are looking in awe yet not

comply caring.) If I hear so much as a rat fart in here the rest of the night, by your Deity and his sonny baby boy Jezzzie, you will all visit the medical wing. Every Mother freaking- cock sucker in this block. He lay there for three weeks, and no one cared. In EBENSBURGH your just meat on a rack... rotting your days away. The guards wrestle saying to carry him off- it did not happen- they need to have a theory as to why he died. So, he pushed his boy down the steps saying that was it- and the dead freak rolled- like a bowling ball- about ready to hit pins. All the FOOTSTEPS reverberation fades away. The Lights went off- there was all Darkness again even in the cells. Silence- nothing- nothing- nothing.

14

LOUD SIGNAL. Sam stares through the bars at the main floor below, eyes riveted to the small puddle of blood where Fat Ass went down. The GUARDS hold their headcounts to the HEAD BULL, who jot on a clipboard. His first night in the joint, Bradly My pussy cost me two packs of Cigarettes and some change. He never made a sound... The expert locks are thrown THUMP! The cons step from their cells, lining the tiers. Sam peers at Bradly, checking him out. Bradly stands in line, collar fastened, hair combed. Bradly goes through the breakfast line, gets a scoop of glove on his tray. WE PAN BRADLY through the noise and misunderstanding... and discover Knaggier and ROOSTER Duffie are watching Bradly go by. Bogs sizes Bradly up with a salacious gleam in his eye, mutters something to Fowl. Rooster laughs. He carefully pussy-e-s it out with his fingers.

Bradly finds a table occupied by Sam and his regulars choose a spot at the end where not an insignificant person is sitting. Ignoring their stares, he picks up his spoon -- and pauses, seeing something in his food. It is a squirming puss- CATCALLER. You are going to look good squirting down on me- Bradly grimaces, unsure what to do with it. HATLEN- is sitting closest to Bradly. At age 85, he is a senior citizen that is lost in his days and established occupant. THAT WE ALL TRUST AND LOVE! SAID SAM! HATLEN, you going to eat that THAT TERRE

SONNY? Bradly cannot bear to watch. BRADLY- WHY

YOU

GOING TO? HATLEN WOULD YOU- mind IF...? A

SMALL kitten-

POPS ITS HEAD OUT OF HIS SHIRT- Bradly passes the WIGGLY THING to HATLEN. HATLEN examines it, rolling it between his fingertips like a man checking out a fineness OF IT FOR HIS BABY. Bradly is riveted with worry. She came in my window at them when I was getting books out to make my rounds. I had to... Mm. Nice THIS ONE READY TO BE BUTTERFLY- OH WELL THAT'S OKAY- HERE BUTTEN'S.

HATLEN GIRLIE kitten Buttons says thanks. I am looking' after her till he is old enough to go on her own- my little one. Bradly nods and proceeds to eat what was called. Carefully. Klit's approach- with talk about the cat.

15

Tigger- Oh, Jesus Christ, here he comes blotting and beaming. Good for you ass hole you got the win- howdy, ladies. It is a fine sunrise. 'Yen got- why it's fine?' He said in his dumb way of speech. He drops his tray down cracking it and sits his ass just as hard on the wood bench. The men start pulling out cigarettes- and rolls and handing them down by his face that was lying on the table- he was drooling. Hell, I sure do love that pussy of mine. I accept as true I owe that puss a big sloppy kiss and BJ when I see him. That is right, send 'em all down my way- I win this- I win. I want to see 'em lined up in a row, pretty line of sexy dancers. An impressive pile forms. he curves down and inhales extremely, sniffing the perfume of dictation. Rapture. Suck my ass... Gee, Sam. Awful shame, your Puss coming' in dead last and all, speaking of dead you see that fat freak is still hanging in there. Say Drywell, you pull sanatorium liability they get that thing out yet- they are burning him at the end of the week if you want to see. I shake my head sacked, to what the kill said... he got joy out of it, he turns back to his food. The silence mounts. I glance around. Men resume eating. Softly I ask his name? WE DON'T FREAKING CARE- PUSS- EAT OR I'LL KILL YOU FOR FUN! BRADLY- I

was wondering if anyone knew his name. I GOT YOU, HE SAID! What the fuck DO you care, new pussy? HE'S YOUR QUIRE? (He resumes eating his slop.)

A DEAFENING NOISE of industrial washers and presses. Bradley works the laundry line. A nightmarish job. IT Doesn't matter what his mother's fucking name was an asshole. Showerheads mounted in bare concrete. Bradley showers with 100 or more men. No modesty here. At least the water is good and hot, soothing his trouser muscles. He is new at it. BOoB, the con supervisor looks and says go, elbows him aside, and shows him how it has done. The Allies, as they are called, in the walls! Duffie- appears from the billowing steam, smiling- saying I am going to get you Babygirl, checking Bradley up and down. Other sis-girls appear from the sides holding down for the ass hole licking. DUFFIE Hard to get... yet I did, and I will keep getting it too... I like that that as so do you- a baby girl! Umm. Bradley tries to step past them. He gets shoved around, nothing serious, just some slap and tickle. Jackals sizing up prey. DUFFIE You're some sweet punk ant you...? Have you been breaking in yet baby? I am taking that and reamed it out! He said... Bradley breaks free, flushed and shaking. He hurries off, leaving the three Allies laughing. UN AH'S! Bradley lies staring at the nightfall, unable to sleep- ass hurting- he thinks and thinks of a way out like slitting his wrists and fuck. The next morning after looking at the poster all night thinking about the man he was and not a gay man's dream- Bradley takes this as a cue to amble over. Seeing the lady in the room eyeing him with the look of nice shoes wants to fuck!

SAM- The wife-killing hotshot. Hello. I am Bradly, I said to him that- as he yelled at me. SAM- Individuals say you are a cold pussy all dry inside and freak- a hard freak to get. The black men of trust at this point said- a man I learned to admire even for being darker. Bodybuilding period in the yard now. Sam plays catch with Klits and Stan, lazily tossing a softball from one place to another. Sam notices Bradly off to the side. Nods with greetings to me. I offer my hand- and he takes it as a shake saying I need you backing up. What do you say- he coming after you- he said with a shank- what hand- lift- I bunch him out and get 3 weeks in the hole... Sam glances at the hand, ignore it? The game continues... with me adding in a fastball to the head and I get it. BRADLY- How do you know that... that I did that? I did not- Why'd you, do it? SAM- I keep my ear open for the story!

BRADLY- I did not, since you asked the question, I was not the one that pulls it out if you want what I am saying. SAM- Every Tom, Dick, and Harry blameless in here at EBENSBURG, don't you know you get that on the way in? or so they think and say- boy, you will fit right in, with us all saying we were set up for this shit even if they need it yah- know. (Off to the other man Bradly's stares.) Klit's! What are you in for, boy? He said back- Didn't do it! Attorney freaked me, and the wife would not! What are you going to do? Sam gives Bradly a look of well you see. - See...? - So, they think mishit smells Better than regulars. That true... if you think so... Did I hear that? What you say- I do not care- he said back. He sends the softball right back, passing it into Stan's hands. Stan drops the ball and grimaces,

wringing his stung hands. Stan nudges Klit's. Watch this... He gusts up to and heaves the ball hard- right at Bradly's head. Bradly sees it coming out of the corner of his eye, whirls, and catches it. Beat. SAM- has not made up my mind yet. I want to go to the Bahamas that is where we wed you know- under a tree- wind blowing in the breeze, she said yes- and we made- love in a hammock looking over the blue-green sea. SAM- I see lots of rocks. I show- the Quartz? - and coal of the train that passes in the night- that the plan right hopes a ride out? Maybe? Bradly squats motions Sam to join him. Bradly grabs a handful of dirt and sifts and says look at a pace of coal it through his hands. Do you think you can get me a new hammer- like my old one...? Quartz, sure. And look. Mica. Shale. Silted granite. There is some graded limestone, from when they cut this lace out of the hill. He finds a pebble and rubs it clean; I want to go somewhere other than here.... He tosses it to Sam if you get in trouble, you do not know me. Why- I can live like this- but you need to be here for what you did- well just like the boy I did not do it- and that is the truth. AND no one has made it... you know... so I do not care- okay... if that is what you want- 50 cones- and 10 packs. I love this shit it was part of my old life- it needs to be aging so I do not forget who I was- Sam- or you would like to stick it through some guard's head? Yes, plant your sex toy in somebody's skull is that it? I do not give a shit but do not say where you got it- the same as be for with the poster. I know that boy! No, that not it at all man. BRADLY, I have no rivals here. That what you think- your dumb shit- and I know that is not so- for the boy talk! SAM- No? Just wait for that going freak you hard like last time. Sam- skims his gaze past

Bradly. I and he are watching them looking at me with sex eyes. SAM- Word gets around. The Allies have taken a real shine to you, yes, they have. Especially this man here.

Klits over a tray of food- Everyone who runs this place loves surprise inspections- so do we- one guard cut me open to see what was up to my ass- I did not want to shit for weeks. They ignore some things, but not a gadget like that. They will find it, and you will lose it. Mention my name, we will never do business again. Not for a pair of shoelaces or a pack of gum, or pair of clean underwire- or a sock of your cock. Would it help if I explained to them, I am not homosexual? They do not meet the requirements to be called- a man- or home-o's. You must be in here for as long as they get their way. BRADLY Tell me something. 'Encyclical queers take by force, that's all they want or know.' I would grow- some balls- and eyes in the back of my cranium if I were you- and tuck your dick in. BRADLY- Thanks for the guidance. SAM That comes free, to you only- I feel I like you for some freaking reason. Giggling- about that hammer- you have seen this- But you understand my concern- is becoming yours, you want to escape. Tunnel and go over the wall maybe? If there's trouble, I doubt a lump of coal- hammer would do much of anything- I miss the joke- why is this funny- it too Freaking little to do that- what- you will see. What is so funny? They want me out of all these boys. (Bradly laughs civilly) You'll know when you see the hammer I want, there is not much of a change in any of it- yet I must try. SAM- I will see what I can do about

it, rises, slapping dust, as he moved about... it is a waste of money and your time and days. Okay, I want it.

I understand. Thank you, Mr...? SAM. The name's Sam. Pleasure doing business with you. They shake your ass over do not say jack shit. They shake hands- Bradly strolls off looking around with no cars at all. He had a quiet way about him, a walk and a talk that just was not ordinary around here. He walks in a park-like just gets a breath of air. Sam watches him go... saying I was wrong about the kid. Goodman... no? um hum...SAM I could see why some of the boys took him for stuck-up- walking with a stack up against his ass or something. Yet without an intention to harm others or others no burdens after doing what he did. Like he had on an obscure covering that would armor him from this hell land of walls and stone.

(The 3 resumes playing catch as he looks about.) Yes, I think it would be fair to say I liked Bradly from the start. Lying on his bunk, Sam unfolds the four sides. SAM- Years later, I found out he had brought in quite a bit more than just ten dollars... A ten-dollar bill. Sam gets his breakfast and heads for the table. Bradly falls in step, slips him a tightly folded square of paper. Under watchful supervision, CONS are off-loading bags of dirty laundry from a truck. Were they bringing some mended tops and pants in for us- He was a man who adapted fast. Underneath vigilant supervision, CONS are off-loading bags of dirty laundry from a 1920's truck for train cars. A certain bag hits his arms. The TRUCK DRIVER gives a look

of okay- at a black con- boy here then strolls over to a GUARD and bull shits.

Sam- loads the bag onto a wagon... and walks off with the prize inside past them all, even past the guards that he bought off.

17

Bags are being unloaded. We find Klit's working the line. Sam- slips the package out of his sheets, carefully checks to make sure nobody is coming, then rips it open. He pulls out the hammer. It is just as Bradly described. Sam laughs softly. the clean sheets are being handed out. Bradly nods. He leaves the line, weaving his way through the laundry room... he moves onward. Sam deposits his dirty bundle and moves down the line to where- Determination... That is how Bradly joined our happy little EBENSBURGH family with more than five dollars on his person in my hand- he made it with me and my boys. Klits- pushes a cart of books from cell to cell. The rolling library. He finds Sam waiting for him. Sam slips the -hammer, wrapped in a towel, through the bars, and onto the cart. I catch Sam's eye, turn, and grab a specific stack of clean sheets. He hands it across to Sam cigarettes slide out of Sam's hand into mine, and more than spotless laundry changes hands. Two packs of smoke. It would take a man about 60 freaking years to tunnel under the wall with one of these. Bradly was right. I finally got the gag... that you could only use the hand on them- if they wanted to beat off or you. Bradly's hand snakes through the bars and makes the object disappear. Next comes 10 cigarettes to pay for postage- as Kilt's hands me my shit! HATLEN nods to me

as I dump out the rocks from the wall out of my bucket, never- ever missing a beat. Just like the guy in the next cell over- freak! HATLEN continues, scooping the cigarettes off the cart and into his pocket- to get him a flashlight to dig- also hid in the bucket. He rolls his cart to Bradly's cell, mutters through the bars: HATLEN Middle shelf, wrapped in a towel- Sam unfolds the slip of paper. Penciled neatly on it is a single word: 'Thanks.' "Out of the shower, the voice said to go to your cells- I was already there weighing my new things. The hand comes back and deposits a small slip of folded paper along with more cigarettes. HATLEN turns his cart around and goes back. He pauses, sorting his books- the flashlight was carved into a book called- The Star girl! A book about a girls' fight for her country- like a twisted holocaust story! Long enough for Sam to snag the slip of paper. Sam unfolds the slip of paper. Penciled neatly on it is a single word: 'Thanks.' Working next to the big washers- a dark, tangled maze of rooms and corridors, boilers and furnaces, sump pumps, old washing machines, pallets of and plats for cars- and hard turns around cleaning supplies and detergents, you name it this was a crap room- where I was about to get it in the ass. Bradly, I had to bet them off... blocking his way... to me- yet he got his way- all did all seven of them. We are assaulted by the deafening noise of the laundry line. Bradly is doing his job, getting good at it. I worked in the woodshop too, yet the girls got me where my boy was not. I made lots of shit like tables and chairs all for my room. And to sell and make some con cone.

Hey, skew when briefest? The grade looked at me and said- freak your mother freaking cock sucking mother tit licking dick slap ass hole with a cheese stick and the ice cream puss finger freak lick sticker! He looms from the shadows to his right, Dick Peters cell on the right of me. A frozen beat. Bradly slams them to the floor, in the lighter, by that... The next day it was all the same as the last Brady took one for the team in the ass- and I think if it would have kept the same it would have made him go nuts. (Cut- sheets room) steam flying in the air foggy and hot-sweaty man at work... a lady's paradise. Bare-chested- and hard bodies to look at! DUFFIE- Honey, hush I want to freak you, that is all. Bradly backs up, holding them at bay, trying to maneuver through the maze. The Allies kept coming, tense and guarded, eyes riveted and gauging his every move, trying to outflank him. Bradly trips on some old giants smuggle. That is all it takes. Bradly gets yanked to his feet. They are on him in an instant, kicking and stomping. Duffie applies a chokehold from behind. They propel him across the room and slam him against an old four-pocket machine, bending him over it. Rooster jams a rag into Bradly's mouth and secures it with a steel pipe, like a horse bit. Bradly kicks and struggles, but Lizer and Peter have their arms firmly pinned. Duffie whispers in Bradly's ear: it is long and hard for you baby girl! Um, do you feel me! DUFFIE- That's it, beat on me. It is Better that way when you are hard to get off. Bradly starts screaming and rolling in the pain of the ass freaking, muffled by the tape over his mouth as they all got their way. I saw yet I PULL BACK, not wanting to get the same wrath- we all knew about it, yet this is the jail where you have what you have and get freak

for freaking others in the ass. I wish I could tell you that Bradly fought the good battle, and the Allies left him alone. I wish I could say that- yet that not how it went- to tell you that, would be an ass of a lie- but jail is no enchanted gay world. SLOWLY SPLAYED is Bradly's screaming face and the men holding him down... and the dingy act behind... He never- ever said who did the act on him...but we all knew- I saw it with my eyes- yet did not want what he was getting. And at that time God was doing the time for him, and it was coming out of his ass... that what I thought, at the time. -After lights out... under the poster, I started making the hole in the wall- I found out the wall was soft from old age- the bars could be spread with the hammer wide enough to get my ass through. It is going to take years- I said. SAM- Things went on like that for a year. The jail life cycle contains predictable, and then more predictable until it is pounded into your head and your brain becomes numb to it all. SAM- The Allies kept at him. From time to time, he was able to fight them off... sometimes not so-o. Numb to all but the pain of past life and the life of now and life you have on the inside. They call out for us to go to the yard for an hour- air and light are good to us-BRADLY WALKS THE YARD, FACE SWOLLEN, AND BRUISED from the dicks in his mouth, and the slapping he got... Every single day or so habitually, Bradly would show up with renewed bruises and cuts. He starts to sit with me and my guys- he has become one of us at this point- I chat with him the others are warming up some- BRADLY EATS BREAKFAST. A FEW TABLES OVER, DUFFIE wakes up and

A French KISS on the lips saying I see you in the showers tonight.

LOVE- YOU baby girl! He said grabbing my adulthood. Klit's guts' up and stared him down. And his ladies like him ran off back to their table.

19

Bradly is working the line into his cell. Warden Marquez 's 'grain & drain' vacation. Bread, water, and all the privacy you could want. SAM- They beat the hell out of him. Half the time it landed him in the medical wing... He always fought, that is what I remember. He fought because he knew if he did not fight, it would make it that much easier not to fight the next time. The rake connects, snapping off over somebody's skull. No bed, sink, or lights A stone closet no seat even until you make it and pay for it. Bradly sits on bare concrete, bruised face lit by a faint ray of light falling through the tiny slit in the steel door. ...the other half, it landed him in solitary. A dick of cars with nude girls on it is all you must look at to pass the time... it is now 1942 and talk of war the inside walls. I got a new poster for his wall as a gift of being a friend to a boy- this type of girl called a PIN-UP! Something to keep his mind from squirming like a toad. And that is how it went for Bradly. That was his routine. I do believe those first two years were the worst for him. And I also believe if things had gone that way, this place would have been the best for him. But then, in the spring of 1942, the powers-that-be decided that... it was time to do hard labor. Warden Marquez speeches the assembled cons via 40's mic: he is dressed stylishly- the war calls of new rails- going from

Pittsburgh to New York- PPR rail line- you only have some of this track to lay in our parts. I need 14 volunteers for a week's work. pulling names and reading them off. Sam exchanges a grin with Bradly and the others. You need to build a viaduct over a valley- its high and some will die doing this- there are no tie-down if you wall 3,000 feet (about the height of the Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in the world)- to the ground below- and your walk beams one step in front of the other- Gandydancer's as they call it- We're going to be taking names in this can here...

Sam glances around at his friends. Wouldn't you know it? I and some fellas I know we are among the names called. It only cost us a 2 pack of smokes per man. I made my usual twenty percent, of course. Bradly also catches his eye. I knew we wanted this job, all seven of us! Kilts- Stan- Brad- Me and the others. It was outdoor factors of rewarding, and May is one damn fine year to be occupied outside, and the cone was good too... 10¢ an hour. We can shuffle past, dropping slips of paper into a bucket. Is work inspected- so it had to be right, or it would go to another asshole that wanted it- fast and cheap. There is a crane, and the steel is bangled overhead and riveted, in the wind- blowing at 30 MPH, one part is down- and you move the whole thing up and do it again 20 supports to do- one down, so high up- Jacker fall, and his dead body just laid there. A guard pushed him- does it matter? No- no on this job. More than 200 men volunteered for the job, and we all got it. TWO CONS dip up a bucket of rivets and tools one a rope to the handle. The rope goes taught. the bucket goes up the side of the new tall steel.

FLAKIER- ...so this shithead lawyer calls long distance from a virgin, and he says, Mr. Flackier? I say yes. He says, sorry to notify you, but your grandmother just died in a plane crash she was 74.

Klit's- Freak- Damn, Flick. Sorry to hear that. FLAKIER- I am not. she was a freaking bitch. I Runoff years ago from that puss- freak, family is not heard of him since. She should for dead anyway years ago from smoking too hard. So, this attorney prick says, your grandmother died a rich gal. Grandfather was a gold tycoon and shit, close to 3 million dollars. Jesus, how lucky some assholes can get. Yes, why did this one a con said. I could use it! Said another. Dick faced guard said- A 3 million dollars. Jeez-us- mother freak! Do you get any of that? 1! That is what they left me. Dick's face- said- Holy freaking shit, that is prodigious! Like winning' a lottery...isn't it? FLAKIER

You are a dumb- piece of shit. What do you think the government's going to do to me? Take a big wet bite out of my dick head, is what. The other graduate we call- Cunt-n-ham- Oh. Had they not thought that they would tack it and bull piss? The GD kids we get it no me... my old lady said so... do the toll's wrong, they make IRS will make you pay out of your pocket. Freak them! 'OH- Uncle Sam puts his hand down your pants and squeezes your dick until it's freak purple.' Always get the short That's a fact... I would know said Klit's. (He spits and then takes a piss on it- over the side of the high viaduct with no sides.) SAM Crying shame. Some cunts got it bad. Klit's what next is he going to jack it too- the

boys how! Some Grandmother- Shit. Sam glances over besides is shocked to see Bradly standing up, listening to the guard's talk. The prisoners keep walking around the steel and downing as asked, eyes on their work and ears on them. STAN- Poor freak. What terrible freaking luck he has. Visualize receiving 1,0000 dollars. -I talk to um- say that is not so-o. SAM- Hey, you nut-o boy? Keep your eyes on your pail and holes and beams! Bradly tosses his hammer to me in the bucket far in the air- and strolls toward Flackier one foot in front of the other 2,075 feet (about twice the height of the Empire State Building) up. SAM-Bradly! Come back! Shit! What is the... SHIT! Stan-

What is he doing... or what... saying- shit? I said- Getting' himself murdered- that what. Bob- damn it...! Tom- harry- look at us with shock and awe! The guards stiffen at Bradly's approach snapping a clip and a tommie gun at his dick saying a blow it off... another gun was at the other head. Dick's face- hand goes to his holster. The guards CLICK-CLICK's rifle bolts. Flackier turns, stupefied to find Bradly there. Mr. Flackier. Do you trust your little girl? That is funny. You are going to look funnier freaking me with that new pussy I will blow into you with this gun. Running on beams we all look- BRADLY. What I mean is, do you think she would go behind your back? Try to F*cking to you? FLAKIER That's it! Step aside, Mate- This toothless mother freak is going to learn how to fly! Flackier- grabs Bradly's collar and propels him violently toward the edge of the ties. The cons angrily keep adding in hot rivets. One goes down a boy's underwire... and he dances. Hot shit- Juss-us! He spoke! STAN- Oh God, he is

going to do it, he is going to throw him off the side... Bob- Oh, oh shit freak, oh Jess-us... if you do trust your baby girl, there is no reason in the world you cannot keep every cent of, that currency for her- if you make it look as if it is for her.

FLAKIER You better start making freaking intelligence. Flackier abruptly jerks Bradly to a stop right at the edge. Bradly's past the edge, beyond his balance, shoe tips scraping the last little bit. The only thing between him and an unpleasant drop to the concrete is Flacker's grip on the front of his shirt on the same part of the beam. Give the little girl a trust fund. IRS allows you a one-time-only gift to your child. It is good up to sixty thousand dollars and hide the rest- or give it to your partner. Partner- my wife you mean- sure... I spoke. Tax-free?

Freaking-A. I do not need any smart wife-killing basted to show me where the shit is in the buckwheat. Get a home- and a car- and more- Income tax-free. I can write it off for you- IRS cannot touch one cent. Go ask the IRS, they will say the same thing. Truly, I feel mindless telling you, I am definite you would have explored the material manually on your own doing. You are the smart hotshot that shot his wife for freaking an older man. Why should I believe you- so- I can squall up in here with you and your gay ass lovers? Oh, that is not nice said- Klit's. 'Ass lover?' he said with confusion... Move the others to another place like Canada!

And you have it all! It is without any glitches and legal. FLAKIER- those guys a bunch of ambulances- cheating-robbing cocksuckers! I would like to have- a day to see my little girl- and the boys to see their families- for this work- and some shin- on the beam for my friends. 'He has balls' said Stan... Co-workers! Wow dreaming

a lot! That is amusing, isn't it? Flackier halts him with a look. Hey, con I am in! he said- nodding! (I made a friend I said to the guys.) HA!

20

We're done looking over this thing- amazing, no? The convicts stand gaping, all pretense of work gone.

Flackier shoots them a look. FLAKIER What are your jammies staring at? GET Back to work, damn it! SAM, you could argue he had done it to curry favor with the guards. Otherwise, make a few supports amongst us cons man. Me, I think he did it just to feel ordinary again... if only for a short amount of time. I and the guys coiled up sitting in a row at ten down the posts 8 a.m., drinking icy cold shin out of jars courtesy of the hardest screw freak, that ever walked the halls of EBENSBURGH State Prison. As before, an object is hauled up the side of the building by rope- only this time, it is a cooler of beer and shin we sat on the one beam looking down the neat one-point perspective of the posts under the tracks. And that is how it happened, that on the last day of the task, the convict crew of spring of '42... light the sun coming up as high up and drinking- feeling like a free man. SAM- The titanic perforate- of the walls even managed to sound benevolent, we sat and drank with the sun on our shoulders and felt like free men. Sam knocks back another sip, enjoying the bitter cold on his tongue and the warm sun on his face. We were the Member of the aristocracy of all Design. He glances over to Bradley squatting apart from the others. Stan drifts back to others, giving them a

look. He looked at us with his eyes sparking like- as he had seen that we approved. And we did and the first steam train passed as we looked up! A rare shout looking up!

It was said that one of us dug a hole and planted 40,000 under this for if he was able to get free- the tracks ran past where he was going to get out- happen to be the plan- I knew. It would work yet it was risky!

21

Bradly and Sam play checkers. Sam makes his move. SAM- King me. They are playing checkers- BRADLY- novel writing- Now there is a strategic game... a freaking mystery- it not that hard I could show you- that something I would like to see if you can get me an LC Smith 28 typewriter. I have a book about a girl who has cancer and passed away at an early age called HER! Any good- it did okay. You will let me teach you to read and write too then... sure... remember I am the man that can do that for you. I have been thinking of getting some boys together and having class if they are okay with it. SAM- You come to the right place- where I can do that you get that for me and teach you how.

I am the man who can get things, and I am the one that can teach things... deal? Sure... he said with a tittering chatting way. I would love to make a story of how someone would bust out of this place. What do you think- I think it will take years- years I have- it is the typewriter I do not. SAM- That'd take you years. BRADLY- Years I have. What I do not have are the pages to use- and the

light to see. You will have it if you do this for me. Okay, I am in he- said- Takings here are slim- for writers. Why would you do it? (smiles) I ask a question? ...With handshakes- we are friends- I would say so- were becoming...? I suppose so-0.

SAM- Bradly? We are getting to be friends... I presume we are. SAM- BRADLY I am blameless, recall- just like you? Just like every Tom, Dick, and Harry in this gargantuan place. Sam takes this as a gentle rebuff, keeps playing. BRADLY What are you in for, Sam Innocent?? Nope- I did it- and I am not happy for it- I burn in hell I no- for killing all my baby girl's- it was- Manslaughter- I killed my kids- out of a moment of crazy all 10 in the head in there one hay bed- after my lady left me. Same as you- I had sex with them too. All girls under 14, she was white just like you! UM- do not worry those days are gone- and there is not a day where I do not feel the pain of it- what saved me is I was 15 at the time- and was not thinking right. Mr.- Mr.- I did not mean to do it I said as they hauled me is saying dead man walking! (I did want the hanging- they said to let him rot and think about it.) SAM- The only shamefaced man in Ebensburg and the 30-mile radius. They can get away with it I could not! It for I am black?

Umm? I said... light of the moon is starting to show- in the yard. He pauses, glancing at all the names scratched on the wall. He rises, makes sure the coast is clear, and starts scratching his name into the cement with his rock-hammer, adding to the record. The glare of the radio- the boys are overhearing the war taking place before the boy band started to practice it was something to do it was time out and takes a seat next to him holding a 1951 Gibson 330 in blue. Oh, how the days

just go- fast and yet slow. We find Sam slouched in a folding chair, watching the sound come out its blues-z. Bradly enters, backlit by the flickering light is rocking to this new sound called rock and roll! Duffie come out of the hole of the wall to get his ass- he was there for doing what he did- I see him and he said he was saving it all up for me. I know. I have seen it three times this month already. Yet they will not kill this man! The entire audience SCREAMS with Duffie holding it out for him to take in and back in the hole, he went. Yet not long enough! Scream- high-pitched and hysterical. Bradly fidgets. Can we talk about business? Klit's sure would you do this man? Sure- free I would love to. The backroom of the library where I did my writing on a typewriter the paid as you go- 10¢ a page or so- an old con looks over; I like him been here oh back to 1909! Blinking at them through thick bifocals- shaking with his hands- a wealth of intelligentsia. Busted open are the doors- it is DUFFIE- puss out of the hole it has been a week. Take a march- old fart. I must be here, I can walk- far- with help! DUFFIE, I said- freak off- and get. figures loom in the corridor, blocking his path. Bradly exits the theater and freezes in his tracks. Two dark Rooster and Horrified, the old man darts past me and out the door. And I get my backside investigated! And snaked on... I know. Bradly turns back- and runs right into Duffie's hardness. DUFFIE- Isn't you going to shriek? The instant I have seen it three times already like this... yet how do you stop it other than kill him and add more time to your time. The Allies are on him like a tight young pussy. They kick everything they wanted wide open and drag him into their mind too. And what was more it was going on with him too. BRADLY- the

heater blowers with fans- back by the laundry, and in the back hot and clanking- I was deep underground- in a rat crap hole. They would never hear me over that. Let us get this over with. Seemingly resigned, Bradley turns around, leans on the rewind, curls his fingers around the typewriter foot's licks his lips, pushes past the others, and smacks them all in the face with it. (Ding!) Hottie's face is dripping blood- and bouncing him bizarre. Freak! Shit! He broke my jaw! Bradley fights like hell but is soon over and forced to his knees. Duffie steps to Bradley pulls out an awl with a vicious eight-inch spike, gives him a good long look at it. DUFFIE Now I am going to open my zipper, and you are going to suck me off bitch for doing this to me, and you are going to swallow my jizz- And when you are down beating me off for my jaw mine too, he said- with hurt. You going to swallow this one- ton for this bitch fight Hunnie. You broke his nose, so he ought to have something to show for it is his shit in your mouth. I bit the ones off! And the skin of the others- and got the even loving' shit freaked out of me for it! I had a shank my neck what was I going to do- and that is when Stan- walked in with his toothbrush stabbing Duffie in the eye- then pulling it out and doing it in the other... (faint smile I gave to the others they looked at me and ran like little girls.) Duffie flips over the railing and comes sailing, and the Flicker came in and did the rest of it- not killing but the next thing to it. Directly toward us, eyes bugging out with the brush hanging in, SCREAMING as he falls. Bradley lies wrapped in bandages. Bradley spent 3 months in the wing. shooting out from under Duffie and skidding across the room now with smashed bones. wreckage at his feet he turns them right around snapping them up

for down. MORT- walks in saying good for you prick this one is for a man on the inside. He got money for him too... or so it was said. G-Damn, Flick.

Look at that sight. Dual things under no circumstances never- ever materialized again after that. The Allies never laid a finger or anything else on Bradley yet again... and Duff never became exposed again with his scary crystal blue eyes. Duffie, wheelchair-bound and wearing a neck brace, is loaded onto an ambulance for conveyance. ...and Duffie never walked again. They moved him to a crazy home with a security infirmary out of state. To my knowledge, he lived out the rest of his days imbibing his nourishment through a clear tub. Where he passed 3 weeks later... from bleeding on the inside. The others were hung- about a year later for other cone takers. Brad needs some lookouts- and a hug when we see him... no... damn straight! I spoke. Bradley, limping a bit, returns from the infirmary. Working on the tracks it has been 10 years- it was said I need a man- all the same boys now an older man- did the weeding- all but 3 that passed- I see their makers out in the filled. Some make me say- some I am glad they are gone some- I never knew- I feel broke inside. I could run for it I know, yet the chins are holding us back- oh well I happy here. Stan- steeps in-house shit. Despite a few hitches, the boys came through in fine style... all-new tracks in a week ahead of what was said. One man falling in the ties. It was a good ass week- I got new things for the boys- toys we call them... you feel it in what it was. Cigarettes, chewing gum, shoelaces, underwire- guy things- playing cards with naked ladies- or who sneaked in the back rooms- you name it... I have it for yens. Sam watches from his cell as Bradley is

brought up and locked away, this man is losing it I said... softly... thunder overhead looking up at darkness overhead. Bradley finds the cardboard tube lying on his bunk- where he keeps meds to keep the days away.

And then he starts... he starts... The lights go off. Bradley opens the tube and pulls out a large, rolled poster. He lets it uncurl to the floor. Yet stops to look at the pussy he loves so-0! A small scrap of paper flutters out, landing at his feet. The poster is the famous pin-up- on the airplanes one hand behind her clit a day, eyes half-closed he sighs, sulky lips parted he kiss it will dig her a hole. Bradley picks up a scrap of paper. It reads: 'No charge. Welcome back.' Alone in the dark, Bradley smiles... you are just like here- and that is what I love.

22

Heads up. They are tossing' cells. Ernie is mopping the floor. He glances back and sees Warden Marquez approach the cellblock with an entourage of a DOZEN GUARDS. GUARD- dick face- What kind of contraband you hiding in there, the boy in that thing? Nothing look for yourself- do not look under I was thinking Bradley catches Sam's eye, nods his thanks. As the men shuffle down to breakfast, still mopping, Ernie mutters to the nearest cell: Sam glances into Bradley's cell The BUZZER SOUNDS, the cells SLAM OPEN. Cons step from their cells. Sunlight casts a harsh shadow across her lovely face and perfects the nude body. Word travels fast from cell to cell. Cons scramble to tidy up and hide things. Marquez enters, nods to his men. The guard's pair off in all directions, making their

choices at random. Cells are opened, occupants' emigrant, A GUARD pulls a sharpened screwdriver out of a mattress, items scattered, mattresses overturned. Whatever contraband is found gets tossed out onto the cellblock floor. Mostly harmless stuff. shoots a nasty look at the CON in authority. FLAKIER Looks clean. Some contraband here, nothing to get in a twist over. Marquez nods strolls to the poster of the nude sexy 17-year-old. MARQUEZ I cannot say I accept this...

...but I understand exclusions can always end. Marquez exits, the guards follow. The cell door is slammed and locked. Marquez pauses, turns back. MARQUEZ- I almost forgot. Here is your bucket back fun stories- I love... remember that- you are here for forgetting yourself. I would hate to withdraw from this past life you need to see. Redemption lies inside. Marquez and his men walk away. Tossing' cells was just an excuse. Truth is, Marquez sought after scope's Bradly up.

LAUNDRY- DAY (1952) I am-a with Bob. Bob nods, crosses to Bradly, taps him. Bradly turns, Bradly is working the line. Flackier enters and confers briefly removes an earplug. CON Jimmie said- Too damn dark to read down there. MARQUEZ- Add another week for blasphemy and wickedness. Bob shouts over the machine noise: BOB- YOU'RE OFF THE TRACK!

Bradly is led in. Marquez is at his desk doing paperwork. Bradly's eyes go to a framed needle-point sampler on the wall behind him that reads: 'HIS VERDICT COMETH AND THAT RIGHT SOON.' MARQUEZ Lonely. A week.

Make sure he takes his Bible. The man is taken away. Marquez enters, trailed by his men. Bradly rises. BRADLY- Good evening. Marquez gives a curt nod and winks. Flackier and Trout start tossing the cell in a thorough search. Marquez keeps his eyes on Bradly observing for a wrong glance or nervous blink. He takes the Bible out of Bradly's hand. Marquez's gaze goes up, all the things going on. MARQUEZ- Let us try the second row. Marquez arrives, makes a thin show of preference a cell at haphazard. He motions at Bradly on his bunk, reading his Bible. The door is unlocked. MARQUEZ- I am pleased to see you reading this. Any favorite passages? BRADLY Watch ye, therefore, for ye know not when the expert in the house cometh. Read this for me and he did it was a verse out of Jobe.

MARQUEZ, I hear you are good with words and big numbers. How amusing- you think you are smart- if you were not here. And a young lady like the one on your wall would be alive today- what do you say to that? FLAKIER- You winna explain this? Photo- um- what do you think it is for your sick freak! I get that look for the man- of um- hum. Bradly glances over. Flackier glances at the books lining the windowsill, turns to Marquez, all in his name. FLAKIER- Looks clean. Some contraband here, nothing to get in a twist over. MARQUEZ- Feasibly we can find something more becoming a man of your schooling. Marquez nods strolls to the poster the sexy hot girl! Bradly is led in. Marquez is at his desk doing paperwork- and that is when the plan starts a story- how but 170 in 5 years? Or you go to the hole. Can be done- oh it well- I say so! You are going to make me a famous man... with your weighting see this is God punishing you for what you did

to that sweet little girl. Bradley's eyes go to a framed needle-point sampler on the wall behind him that reads: 'HIS JUDGMENT COMETH AND THAT RIGHT SOON.'

MARQUEZ My wife made that in church group- she is older, yet I do not do what you do leave one for younger and then kill her to bang yet another. Yes, - sir... It is very pretty, sir. See my kids this one is the age of that girl... winna freak her up too?

No...! MARQUEZ You DON'T like working in the laundry- you bitch so here is your new job- take it? You do not have a choice. Do you like this? No, sir. Not especially.

23

Darkroom- Bradley's in his bunk, working on a model of the viaduct for his train set. He puts the knight on a chessboard by his bed, adding it to four pieces already there: a king, a queen, and two bishops. He turns to his nude girl in the Moonlight casts bars across her face, yet he is in love. It is a beautifully crafted chess piece in the shape of a horse's head, poise, and nobility in gleaming stone. A series of bleak rooms stacked high with unused filing cabinets, desks, paint supplies, etc. Bradley enters. BRADLY- I would not say 'friends.' I am a convicted murderer who provides sound financial planning. That is a wonderful pet to have you. He hears a FLUTTER OF WINGS. An adult crow lands on a filing cabinet and struts back and forth, checking him out. Bradley smiles. BRADLY Hey,

GIRLIE kitten Buttons. Where's HATLEN? HATLEN pokes his head out of the back room. HATLEN Bradly! Though I heard you out here! I have been reassigned to you. Hey, the guard can I get a new frock to look like it was jammed up someone's ass- HATLEN I know, they told me. Isn't that a kick in the ass? Come on in, I will give you the dime tour. HATLEN leads Bradly into the bleakest back room of all. Rough plank shelves are lined with books. HATLEN's private domain. HATLEN Here she is, the EBENSBURGH Prison Library- and writing spot. Along with this side, we got National Geographic's. On the side, the Reader's Digest Condensed books. Bottom shelf there, some Ray Bradbury- the new one I like- and Edgar Allan Poe. Every night I pile the cart and make my rounds to the boys. I printed the names on this sheet here. Well, that is it. Easy, peas', lemon squeezy. Any questions? In all that time, have you ever had an associate? No, I do not do this all down here on my own- there is no grade where I would go really- to GD old for that they say- Bradly pauses. Something about this does not make any sense. HATLEN? How long have you been a librarian? Since 1910. Yes, about 40 years. BRADLY at no time needed one. Not much to it, is there? So why? Why me at this point? I don't-no. Be nice to have some company down here for a change with a person and not just the cat. FLAKIER- YOU! Yes, you would be posts to himself... another GUARD, a huge person named DICKINS.

That is, he the one that can give you a shit load. That is the one- not a babe skew. Flackier exits. Dickins approaches Bradly threateningly. Bradly stands his ground wondering why waiting for whatever comes next. Finally: Dickins- I am

Dickins. I have been, uh, thinking' become a writer also, just like the man up stars- I want your help to get there free- and I give you what you need. Bradly covers his surprise. Glances at HATLEN. HATLEN smiles. Pull down one of their desks there. Someone on the inside... if you are well! I see.

Well. Why don't we have a seat and talk it over? Bradly and Dickins grab a desk standing on end and tilt it to the floor. They find chairs and settle in. HATLEN returns with a tablet with a 50-pound typewriter, has a tough time with it- slides them before Bradly. What did you have in mind? A weekly draw on your pay? Then if so, you need 4 a year. You are writing I will edit- and it must be a hit... done. He was right. You do not want your money in a bank, keep it at home- What's that going to earn you? Is it if your book goes to be sold 55% percent a year of everything that is in the text? We can do a lot better than that- if you hear me out. So, tell me, Mr. Dickins. The story and the length you had in mind, and I say yes or no. Klit's did not say that! To that man- without getting sucked the freak off. Bob- God is my witness. And MaeDell, he just winks over and over for a few seconds, then laughs his ass off. Subsequently, he shook Bradly's hand and hugged him. STAN- My hairy ass! HATLEN, he hugged him. About freaking shit, myself. All Bradly needed to be a suit and tie, in a pipe smoking- he would have been the big shot again- if you please. Bob- Manufacturer's yourself some provisions, Bradly. If you want to call it that. I can do more than that.... Ah? SAM- Got you out of the laundry, no? that more than your share here... boy. Nope let us just see... How 'bout increasing the reading room? Get some new novels in there and a table

and some were to sit for an hour or two. With me as the guard- HA! Funny- how you 'expect to do that... 'I have my ways. HATLEN SI have, I have had seven wardens done time- here for the period of my term, and I have learned one great immutable veracity of the universe: is not one of 'em been born their pick get short and pucker up tighter than a 10-year-old girl's pussy after school when you ask for means.' -How 'bout fucking a man in the ass? Go to hell... I said- throwing my beard- been there they did not want me that why I am here. He spoke.

AMUSEMENT all around. Bradly blinks at them. The chat- I making you money- pay up- what- what did you say to me- not a dime- not a nickel. Still, I would like to try, with your permission, to get money from the outside. I will send a letter a week. They cannot ignore me forever. My budget's stretched thin as of now. Are you psychic? I see. I could author a story about you fucking me in the ass and see where that goes... the hole I went. I want more walls. More bars. More guards. And you at the end of a rope! And I will be dancing at that! And I piss on your ashes! Like your books, that does not matter, the only one that does it is this one here and he slams it into my head- saying get it! They cannot overlook me incessantly. Yes, they can, nonetheless, you write your letters if it makes you content. You pay for it- with your makings... if you get anywhere, I will step in. So, Bradly started writing a letter a week, just like he said he would. Nothing for 5 years. Bradly pops his head in. The GUARD shakes his head, every day- ha I said so- said the prick... that runs the shitter. NOPE- no answers. The courtyard softball game is being played- team- are playing hard. Tied game... hot sun- it was for blood. Back over white...

baseball uniform SMACKS the ball high into left field and races for first. They rescheduled the start of the intramural season to coincide with EBENSBURGH season... for we were the best- and went on to play with the big deals- that do this for a living. It was the cover ball... they said. The Batter sits across from Bradley. The line winds out the door. For the batter up my home run. Sam- and the boys- Got us out of the woodshop a 4 month out of the year, and that was fine by us. I gave a price... Number 19 I was. Sam- 14... Klit runs into the yard, frantic and breathless. He finds Bradley and Sam on the bleachers. Sam? Bradley? It is HATLEN. trying to calm HATLEN, who has Stan in a rush in with Bradley and Sam at his heels. They find a chokehold and a rail spick to his ear. Bob is terrified that he is going to die. C'mon, HATLEN-ie, why don't you just calm them down, okay man? Old man- They want to send me a-way- this is my home... your all are my family. He kicks a table over as he falls out of shock. Tax files explode through the air. What is going on? Down here no one saw... You are not fooling anybody, so just put the damn spick down and stop scaring the shit out of folks. He erupted into tears. The storm is over. Stan staggers free, gasping for air. Bradley takes the knife, passes it to Sam. Falls into Bradley's arms with great heaving tears. You had worse clean out your ears- with a would sick. Aren't you heard? His move meant came through that he was harmless! Old men cracked should be in old age house. Isn't there anything wrong with HATLEN? HHe is just deep-rooted in his ways- in his comfort zone, that is all 60 years, this is all he knows about- with life.

The sun rises over the gray stone. HATLEN I can take care of you no more. Her paws- kitten Buttons through the bars. And runs off... and was hit by a car... he later found out. You go on now. You are free my little kiddie. STAN- Institutionalized, my ass.

SAM- Man's been here 60 years. This habitation is all he knows. Here, he is an important man, an educated man. A librarian. Out there, he is nothing but a used-up old coin with arthritis in both hands. I could not even get a library card if he applied. Do you see what I am saying? Sam, I do believe you are speaking out of your butt. SAM- Belief what you want. These walls are humorous. First, you hate um, then you get used to them. After long enough, you get so you depend on them. That's 'institutionalized.' KLIT'S Shit. I could never- ever get that way. Stan- Say that when you have been inside if HATLEN has. (tenderly) They send you were for everything you did and take what you did not, the parts that reckon, nonetheless. THE POSTER. Sexy as ever the lower lips wore from kissing them. The rising sun sends fingers of rosy light creeping across her face. HATLEN stands on a chair, poised at the bars of a window, cradling GRILLE kitten Buttons in his hands. The door swings hugely open, revealing HATLEN standing in his cheap suit, carrying a cheap bag, wearing a cheap hat. TWO SHORT SIREN BLASTS herald the opening of the gate. HATLEN walks out to freedom, tears streaming down his face, said I do not want to go- He looks back. Sam, Bradly, and others stand at the inner fence, seeing him off. The enormous gate closes, smearing them from view. HATLEN is now riding the bus with fear, grasping the seat in front of him,

engrossed by the trepidation of speed and motion. And the bus itself... I saw a car, but it was not like these killing things. It is 1969- HATLEN- Dear Fellas. I cannot believe how reckless things move on the outside. ...which carries through as he walks. People and traffic. He keeps looking at the women. An alien species. I look and see women, too, that is the other thing. I forgot they were half human. There are women everywhere, in every shape and size. I find myself semi-hard most of the time, cursing myself for a dirty old man.

TWO YOUNG WOMEN stroll by in short skirts and tank top-shirts have shown boobs and nipples. Baby suck hard on one 14year old girl's nipple! Wow! I said looking around. I saw a pussy out in the open! Run around naked? Who would have to think it? Not a brassiere to be seen, nipples poking out at the world. Jeez-us, please-us. Back in my day, a woman out in public like that would have been arrested and given a sanity hearing. They are calling this the Summer of Love. Summer of Loonies, you ask me. The park is filled with the young uncalled HIPPIES. Hanging out. Happening. Here is the source of the music: a radio. A HIPPIE GIRL gyrates to the Beatles, stoned, in her own world. Things have got different out here. Lady that rains the home- where they put me- Talk about it. Young punks protesting the war. Do you imagine? Even my own kid. I ought to bust his freaking skull. Guess the world moved on- and gone nuts yet once um I heard about war but never seen it like this. I see in this box boys being blasted a part of what... I do not get the baby killing. 'Young people speaking their minds. Getting so much resistance from behind. It is time we stopped, hey, what is that

sound? Everybody looks at what is going on. Manly saying wood ray for I sides.'

The music today is not Yankee Doodle Dandy- it 'bout fighting, freaking, and lust- the whole thing going complete bust! Bagging groceries. I saw an automobile once when I was young. Now they are everywhere I look to run my ass over.

CHILDREN underfoot. Stilling food and making fun of this old man that not getting it. The kids get swept off by MOM. Sam starts bagging the next customer.

SLOW PUSH IN on Sam. Surrounded by MOTION and NOISE. HATLEN comes trudging up the sidewalk. He glances up as a prop-driven airliner streaks in low overhead. Feeling like the eye of a storm. People were everywhere, whipping around him like a gale. Strange. Loud.

Dizzying. It gets distorted and weird, slow, and thick, pressing in on him from all sides. The noise level intensifies. The hollering of children deepens and distends into LOW EERIE HOWLS. He is in the grip of a major anxiety attack. I fall to the ground passing out... Trying not to panic. Trying not to run. and just laid there... they did not care... some young girl with her skirt over me took the spot. I got a free show when I came to it. Blinking sweat. He bumps into a lady's cart, mumbles an apology, and keeps going. Breaks into a trot. Kids running down the aisle back like his that he killed back in the 1900s, through the door into the back rooms, faster and faster, running now, slamming- he sees their faces- and they speak to him... through a door marked 'Employees Only.' where he slams the door, and leans deeply against it, shutting everything out, breathing heavily. Alone now. Asking to take a leak- He goes to the sink, splashes his face, tries to calm down. He

can still hear them out there. They will not go away. He glances around the restroom. Small. Not small enough. He enters a stall. Locks the door... breaks down- and puts the toilet lid down and sits on the shitter. Better than he was used to. HATLEN enters. The room is small, old, and dingy. An arched window affords a view of Congress Street. Traffic noise drifts in. HATLEN sets his bag down. He does not know what to do. He just stands there, like a man waiting for a bus. He can reach out and touch the walls now. They are close. Safe. Almost small enough. He draws his feet up so he cannot be seen if somebody walks in to look and see if he is going to freak a kid or something in the girl's room. He will just sit here for a while. Until he calms down. There was a girl in the room with me but- I am too old for that shit now- even if I would take it, she was about nine years old. That is the shit that got me locked up back then-, yet I knew it would be a way for them to send me back home... nah- she is too cute and sweet blond-haired person, blue eyes baby-talking- I' m-a too old for this... It is challenging work. I try to keep up, but my hands and legs hurt most of the time, not able to stand for long... with leaning on something. I do not think the store manager likes me very much, I would kill that man and not think about it... (Cut) walking home, there is a harsh truth to face, I going to do something to a young'un at some point I just know it... No way I am going to make it out here... without some love- that is all around me. He pauses at a pawnshop window. An array of handguns. All I do anymore is think of a little girl to be with me to break my given terms of freedom. I am a dirty old man... I find myself saying yet I never had it so-o. The parole board got me into

this midway nut house called the earthly home, and a job bagging grocery at the market... I am lying smoking in bed reading some news and freaking out about that, unable to sleep- the world has lost it. Terrible thing, to live in fear. I know it all too well. HATLEN sits alone on a bench, feeding dogs in the park- I not a friend out here. All I want is to be back where things make sense. Where I will not have to be frightened all the time- of them me and everything. Most mom and dad at this age think I am monster... yet not so-o. I keep thinking kitten Buttons might show up and say hello, but she never does, oh that right she passed- I hope wherever he is, he is doing okay and making new friends, um oh yes... I load my gun... and take the last blast... at 81 years old I have lived long enough- and do nothing with my life other than waste space. I am a grandpa, that never had that- yet I sick- I am sick... time to face hell! A young WOMAN about 18 leads HATLEN up the stairs toward the top floor. He has fining with a blast to the head and, these notes for you to get and read on the inside.

24

Klit's and Seger start swinging picks into the soft earth, quickly ripping out a hole. Sam reaches into his jacket and pulls out a beautiful wooden box, carefully stained and polished. He shows it around to nods of approval. BRADLY- That's pretty, Sam. Nice work. Sam- I have trouble sleeping at night. The bed is too small. I have bad dreams like I am falling. I woke up screaming. Sometimes it takes me a while to remember where I am... in the darkness. The man looks at me saying

what's wrong thinking about what you did- good for you! All that is left of this man is his story I made into a book on my shelf. Bradley reads the letter and now reads a book to Sam and the others: A long silence. Bradley folds the letter, puts it away, and the closing of the book. Softly: He should 'a perish in here, damn it. Bradley is sorting books on the cart. He replaces a stack on the shelf- and pauses, noticing a line of ants crawling up the wood. We find Bradley, Sam, and the boys working with picks and shovels. He glances up. Is that kitten Buttons? It was- that why he passed over you I said... but I took the cat in. Low hilly terrain all around. HANDSOME CONS are at work in the Sunflower fields.

GUARDS patrol with carbines, keeping a sharp eye.

They glance over to the pickup truck. Flicker's chewing the fat with Merit and Teckker. A WHISTLE BLOWS. GUARD- Water break! Five minutes! Work stops. Cons head for the pickup truck, where water is dispensed with dipper and pail. Sam and the boys look at Bradley. Bradley nods. Now's the period. The group moves off through the misunderstanding, using it as cover. They head up the slope of a nearby hill and quickly decide on a suitable spot.

The guards did not notice. STAN- Shovel man in. Watch the dirt. Stan jumps in and starts spading out the hole. Seger- glances up and sees the men on the slope. What freaking GD shit. Suddenly, other conks start breaking away into groups, dozens of them heading toward the slope. The guards look around. FLAKIER- What am I talking to myself? Kitten

Buttons, Bradly lays him in the box, followed by Brook's letter. Bradly pulls a towel-wrapped bundle from his jacket and unfolds it. Sam places the casket in the hole. The kitten Buttons was just a crow. Neither was much to look at. Both became institutionalized. See what you can do for 'um. A-men. A moment of silence. Bradly gives Sam an encouraging nod. SAM- Lord gives them a mind. HATLEN was a sinner. 'a men's all around. The boys shovel dirt into the small gravel and tamp it down. He straight-arms a door and develops into the wall superintending the exercise yard. He leans on the railing, scans the yard, sees Bradly chatting with Sam. FLAKIER- You- What the freak did you do? Your ass, warden's office, now! I got my books and my library- where it was then named the nicest in the state- and I gave boys like- sager their education, young ass- that do not know shit from the shin. Bradly shoots a worried look at Sam, then heads off. It was just something he loved doing- see kids make it out of the shit pile. Dozens of parcel boxes litter the floor. Raillie, the duty guard, sees through them. Flackier enters, trailed by Bradly. What is all this? FLAKIER- You tell me, freak-dick dipstick! They are posted to you- ass wipe, every 'Ha' damn one! The man thrusts an envelope at Bradly. Bradly just stares at it. Here look at this... Bradly takes the envelope, see the money inside saying I got it! In response to surrounded assets for your library project... 'These seems seven dollars. Flackier glares at him- saying you made more than I at this point. I wonder if I can get more...? Freak- your mother freaking loves my ass hole, dick sucking- truck muff-pipe love- cum-galloping puss- eater!!! I dropped the book I was holding... I want all this out of

this man's office before the warden gets back and see that you made it ...did not-like I. Flackier exits. Bradly touches the boxes like a love-struck man fingering a gorgeous woman. Good for you, Bradly. It merely took 15 years. From now on, I send 5 letters a week instead... Alone now, Bradly starts going through the boxes like a starving man exploring packages of records. He rips open another box. This one contains an old phonograph player- looking old that you must hand crank, industrial gray and green, the words 'Ebensburg Public School District' stenciled on the side. The box also contains stacks and stacks of used record albums. He does not know where to turn first. He gets giddy, ripping boxes open and pulling out books, touching them, smelling them. Looking at all the songs he remembers and does not... yet. Bradly reverently slips a stack from the box and starts flipping through them. Nat King, Bing Crosby, etc. playing them all he came a-colored a movie of heartbreaker shots from 1953 up 1963 all 10 years - all of them- were the boys all sat and felt like a free man- in the larger viewing room. Sam- came through yet again... along with a new poster! A sexy Playboy Playmate misses 1975 with dark hair, green eyes, and short, showing full frontal. Lots of detail on this one! The line was rocking down there... Thanks!

25

Bradly is reclined in the chair, transported, arms fluidly conducting the music. Ecstasy and rapture.

EBENSBURG no longer exists. It has been banished from the mind of men. He slides the Mozart album from its sleeve, lays it on the platter, and lowers the tonearm to his favorite cut. The needle HISSES in the groove... and the MUSIC begins, lilting and gorgeous. Bradley sinks into Tant's chair, overcome by its beauty it is a thing of beauty. Tant sits in one of the stalls, Jughead comic on his knees. Bradley wrestles the photos player onto the guards' desk, sweeping things onto the floor in his haste. He plugs the machine in. A Sam light warms up. Tant lunges to his feet, pants tangling around his ankles. The platter starts spinning. Tant pauses reading, puzzled. He thinks he hears music. TANT- Bradley? Do you hear that? He works up his courage, then flicks all the toggles to 'on.' A SQUEAL OF FEEDBACK echoes briefly... Bradley shoots a look at the bathroom... and smiles. Cons all over the prison stop whatever they are doing, freezing in mid-step to listen, gazing up at the speakers. Go for him... He lunges to his feet and fences the front door, then the bathroom. He returns to the desk and positions the P.A. microphone...and the -HUE- is suddenly broadcast all over the prison. Through yard... the numbing routine of prison life itself... all grind through just stands in place, listening to the MUSIC, hypnotized... SAM, I tell you, those PHOTOS WHEN farther than anybody in a gray place dare to dream. IT MADE YOUNG LUSTING HOPE COME into our drab little birdcage and made these walls dissolve away... besides for the briefest of moments- every man at EBENSBURGH felt AS IF HE WAS free. It pissed the warden off something abysmal. Marquez striding up the hallway with Flackier- RIPPING THE FILM OUT THEY

DANCED AROUND THE FLAMES. Marquez and Flackier broke the door in. Bradley got 5 weeks in the hole for that little stunt. Bradley looks up with a sublime smile. We hear Tant POUNDING on the bathroom door: TANT- LET ME OUT! LOW ANGLE SLOW PUSH IN on the massive, rust-streaked steel door. God, this is a terrible place to be. Bradley does not seem to mind. His arms sweep hugging himself saying pus- puss- pussy- the movie was playing in his head. STAN Couldn't play something' good, huh? CCR when you were in there the boys headed?

BRADLY- The poverty struck the entrance down before I could take requests. CHUB- Was it worth two weeks in the hole? BRADLY Easiest time I ever took I had photos to look at. STAN Shit. No such thing as an easy time in the hole. A week seems like years. BRADLY- I had Mr. Mozart to keep me company. I hardly felt the time at all. Oh, they let take their nudes down there, huh? I could 'a swear they confiscated that stuff. BRADLY- (it in my heart, in my head) The music was here... like the photos, and here. That is the one thing they cannot remove, not ever- ever- never.

That is the beauty of it. You love the other side... Haven't you ever felt that way about music or your girl, Sam? You killed your thought...? Nah- I am innocent... just like you! I had played a mean harmonica as a younger man. So did I lose my feeling for it. It did not make much sense on the inside. This hole is where it makes the most logic. We need it so we do not forget about optimism.

That there are things in this world not carved out of gray stone with guns your stuff.
That does not smell like shit and piss- That there is a small place inside of us they
can never lock away, and that place is called optimism. SAM- Optimism is a
hazardous entity. It can Enterprise a man crazy. It has abode now. Well to get used
to the inkling. Like HATLEN did?

26

He regards the harmonica as a man confronted with a Martian artifact.
He considers trying it out, even holds it briefly to his lips, almost nervous- but puts
it back in its box lost in how to play it. And there the harmonica will stay... Sam
emerges into the fading daylight. Bradley's waiting for him. He is ten years older
than when we first saw him at a parole hearing. He removes his cap and sits. slides
open with an enormous CLANG. A stark room beyond. SEVEN HUMORLESS
MEN sit at a long table. An empty chair faces them. We are again in: Sam enters,
ten years older than when we first saw him at a parole hearing. He removes his cap
and sits. It says here you have served 40 years of a 3-life sentence. Do you feel you
have been transformed? Yes, sir, without a doubt. I can say I am a transformed
man. No danger to humanity, that's God's truth. Rehabilitated. A big rubber stamp
slams down 'PROHIBITED.' Sam nods, solemn. They settle in on the bleachers.
Bradley pulls a small box from his sweater, hands it to Sam. Same old, same old shit
new f-n day. Thirty years. Jess-us pleas-us. When you think and say it... where,
how, and when. Anniversary gift. Open it. A shiny new gold harmonica engraved

red case. One week later I got in a new gold demand hole DG 335 Gibson, 1977!

Something I will be taking with me I thought if I ever get out of here. It is very pretty, Bradly. Thank you. I had to go through one of your challenges. Optimism you do not mind. I wanted it to be a surprise. Are you going to play something? Maybe... Men line the tiers as the evening count is completed. The convict's step into their cells. The control switch is thrown, and all the doors' slams shut THUMP!

Bradly finds a cardboard tube on his bunk. The note reads: 'A new girl for your anniversary. the vagina of the nude front shot of Alicia Silverstone was blown up in even a bigger poster for the wall- you know the one with the red and white coat- slow his fingers went in there- and the hole was wined... and we find Sam gazing blankly as darkness takes the cellblock. Adding up the months, weeks, days...

Bradly was as good as his word. He kept writing to the State Senate. Two letters a week instead of one. Marking them all in the walls... that is when he found the way... Bradly yanks his kerchief down, grinning in exhilaration. Sam and the others follow suit. They step through the hole in the wall, exploring what used to be a sealed-off storage room, lots of shelves going up. Those checks came once a year like clockwork.

27

(Back)

STAN- Treasure Island Robert Louis... Kristi-ie by Stephen King-er that's CARRIE YOU DUMB SHIT! You will love it- it is about a girl like you, that

lost her way. Sam and the boys are opening boxes, pulling out books. You would be amazed how far Bradly could stretch it. He made deals with book clubs, charity groups...he bought the remaining Sam books by the pound... I got here an auto repair manual, and a book on soap carving. BRADLY- Trade skills and hobbies, those go under educational. Stack right behind you. Making the shelves for new library rooms, where the boys were sitting looking over yet something they were proud of I would go to Nassau is the capital and largest city of the Bahamas. It is what... and where? Nas saw... was that at...? That is the place where I would love to spend the rest of my days if I could. It was like living life on repeat 2 years has passed- and the line needs work it was the same name that wanted the job like before... that is where Klits made his run for it... and got so far down the line... to the crossing tracks, and there was an oncoming train- and his foot got stuck, as it switched; and the flying steam train could not and did not want to stop for a con... that rain him as over-it was later found out the man was for the real innocent of his crimes. Shawshank- what this one- you would like it Kilt's it about busting out- SAM- That should go under... that is how he could the idea. Sounds educational too, is that where I going to put it? Sam is making a sign, carefully routing letters into a long plank of wood. It turns out to be... the polished wooden sign over the archway: 'EBENSBURGH.H' Library.' Revealing the library in all its complete glory: shelves lined with books, tables, and chairs, even a few potted plants. Stan is wearing headphones, listening to May the 'Bard of Paradise Fly up Your Nose!' on the record player singing to it sounding so out of tune. By the year Jimmy Carter

was doing nothing, Bradley had transformed a broom closet smelling of turpentine, and mouse crap into the best prison library in New England. All this work brought in shit loads of dirty cash- oh and there were lots of ways to cover that up and make your fortune. Cheap work- and creep parts- can keep the rail line coming back for this man. SAM- That was also the year Warden Marquez instituted his famous 'Esoteric-Available' program. You may remember reading about it. It made all the papers and got his picture in People magazine. Yet there I was covering it over making it look like grants to the walls. Cutting pulpwood, making ties. repairing bridges and causeways, with new stronger ones digging storm drains...

MARQUEZ... an honest, liberal fee in rectifications and therapy. Our inmates, correctly supervised, have been put to work outside these walls accomplishing all manner of civic service. Cutting pulpwood, repairing bridges and causeways, digging storm drains... along with your passenger railways. The boys listening from behind the fence, as the flashes go off. MARQUEZ- These men can acquire the value of an honest day's labor while on condition that, they are making an appreciated service to the community- and at a bare minimum of expense to Mr. and Mrs. Jane and John, Taxpayer! STAN- Sounds it out- like railroad-gang', you ask me. SAM- Nobody asked you. A RAILROAD-GANG is grading a culvert with picks. There is dust and the smell of sweat in the air. GUARDS patrol with sniper rifles, a pushy WOMAN REPORTER in an ugly hat bustles up the grade, trailed by a PHOTOGRAPHER. You there...! You men...! A Railroad-GANG is pulling stumps, bogged down in the mud.

We are going to take your picture now! Freak yes! STAN Come' m' on!

We are showing' our tools and grinning' like fools! Take the damn picture!

WOMAN REPORTER- You will be in the magazine! And there is the photo- with all the boys' unzips, reaches inside. The others do likewise, the sight of a dozen men displaying their penises and smiling brightly. Her readers go wobbly, and most must sit down- as they cannot believe their eyes. Working- a man in the sun showing all they have- to the girls looking over from the way. We were something to see the outlaws... sexy- no? I said... about the working- TED a man that was a company owner- that felt like he was being cheated. 'These preserves, you are going to put me out of the industry! With this backstabbing nig-ger work you got here; you can underbid any independent in the metropolis.' Marquez opens the box. Alongside the cherry pie is an envelope. He runs his thumb across the thick stack of cash it contains. Pins are being hammered. A boy is hit with a slug- in mud and blood, pinned by a fallen laying over a sharp tree stump- killed they just thought the body in the woods. The wolf's well gets him the road said- back to work. Men rush over to help him- 'he'- dead- he said in poor English. Marquez- barely takes notice. You be sure and thank your little girl Jill- that is 10 years old for her fine cherry pie I had. Made just for you... she said... you would get it.

SAM... There was Bradly, keeping the books. Bradly finishes preparing two bank deposits. Marquez hovers near the desk, keeping a watchful eye.

BRADLY- Two deposits, for the Bank and at First Nash. Night drop, like always. Marquez pockets the envelopes. Bradly crosses to the wall safely and shoves the ledger and sundry files inside. Marquez locks the safe, swings his wife's framed sampler back into place. He cocks his thumb at some laundry and two suits in the corner. Genuinely nice... Want the rest of that? Little girl pussy tastes the same... The little ass tastes like shit, cannot bake worth shit, and cannot freak either, Cherry- it was not that good... Bradly trudged down the corridor with Marquez's laundry, the pie box under his arm. LIBRARY- Sam- munching on it the girl's cherry concoction- Umm that the same- how it should be, no- away as he helps Bradly sort books on the shelves. SAM- Got his fingers in a lot of cherry pies, look at the man he eats a lot of them out too- just like you did- from what I hear. - and you end up here... I did not do anything to be ashamed of... What you hear is not half of it. He has frauds and younger girls you have not dreamed of. Bribes on his bribes and babies if they did have the money. That one way to pay the man off... There is a river of dirty pussies running through this place. Money like the girl can be a problem. Eventually, you got to explain where it came from, that is where I and the boys come in... if ever caught, I take the brunt of it- for not making him what I said I would. That is where I come in. I channel it, funnel it down in play with it, mesh it... stock it found up was to cover their ass as I did with playing with young holes. Then when it comes back... It is clean as a virgin's honey hole that he never- eat out! The money that is... the girls I can say... that... HA! Then behind every sheltered transaction, behindhand every dollar earned... was this man

making all the wrongs right... Bradley is at the desk, crunching kindly as he totals up figures on an adding machine. Making that baby freak shit hips of money. I do it and get life... I no right. The money- Cleaner- the girl I feel for- I have change but that someone little girl. By the time Marquez retires, I will have made him a millionaire. You are like me getting soft he and I should be hard about hearing this. Funny how I must get rid of it I got the kid pregnant said the warden. Here is the money to pay for that too... I spoke. Jesus... They ever catch this, and I will be in here with you mother fucking cock sucker, going to wind up wearing a number like your sorry ass. BRADLY- (smiles) I thought you had more faith in me than that. I do not have faith in anything but that- and points up. UM- I SAID! Does it ever bother you? BRADLY- I do not run the frauds, Sam, I just process the profits. AND HERE ABOUT THE MONS IN THE NIGHT That's a fine line. I mean I hear them in the office made just for his sex toys with this young'un... wiping the shit out of them, and fucking them so hard you could think the walls would have caved in... But I have also built that library and used it to help a dozen guys get their high school diplomas. Why do you think the warden lets me do all that? I DON'T DO WHAT HE IS ANYMORE... I could have yet would it have been more time added to me for all? SAM- To keep you happy and doing the Washing, clean his come covered sheets. Add in Money and young girls and you have it all. Maybe- that is not my life anymore... I work cheaply. That is the trade-off- I get paid in getting laid- yet I afraid. YET I feel sick for doing it... HA! I feel it too... yet he is older than both of us. What can you do... right that's-a life- with- a girl-

and a- her or another she... that does not matter. I got yah... hot shot ways of life... you think you have it all yet really you have nothing. I have more than him now- I feel. And that is my pride- with hope.

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SAM- Prison time is slow time. Sometimes it feels like stop-time. So, you do what you can to keep going... In 1977 JOHNIE WILLIAMS, a damn good-looking kid in his mid-20's. The bus RUMBLES through the gate. The new pussy disembarks, chained together single file. The old-timers holler and shake the fence. A deafening gauntlet. Johnnie and the others are marching naked and shivering, covering with delousing powder, greeted by BOOS and HOOTS. The bars slam with a STEEL CLANG. Johnie and his new CELLMATE take in their new surroundings. JOHNIE Well. Isn't this shit? DALLYING Johnie as he struts along, combing his ducktail, cigarette behind his ear. (We need The Coasters or Del Vikings on the soundtrack here. Jerry Lee Lewis.) SAM Johnie Williams came to EBENSBURGH in 1975 for one year for B&E Brick and entering to you all. Cops caught him sneaking' TV sets out the front door of a James way. A SHRIEKING BUZZSAW slices ten-foot lengths of wood. Sam runs the machine while some other OLDTIMERS feed the wood. Young punk, Mr. Rock n' Roll, long hair hippy overconfident freak. Johnie is hauling the cut wood off the conveyor and stacking it, it is a ball-busting job, but the kid's a blur. JOHNIE (slapping his gloves) C'mon there, old boys! Movin' like molasses! Makin' me look bad! The old guy's just grin

and shake their heads. SAM- We liked him straightaway. Johnie regales the old boys with his exploits: JOHNNIE ...so I am backing out the door, right? Had a TV like this... Big old thing. I could not see shit. Rapidly, here is this voice: 'Sounds like you have done time all over.' Been in and out since I was 13. Name the place, chances are I been there. What made you come here- the town was a postcard. Anyways back to what I was saying... Halt kid! Hands up in the air! Well, I just stand there holding on to that TV, so the voice says: 'You hear what I said, boy?' And I say, yes ass hole, I sure did! But if I drop this freaking object, you got me on the destruction of belongings too! The whole table falls about laughing. The poker game is in progress. Johnie, Bradly, Sam, and the boys. STAN- You did a stretch in Cashman too. JOHNNIE- Yes. That was a comfortable ride, let me tell you. Work programs, weekend furloughs. Not like in here at this dump. It is time you established a new occupation. (The game arcades) What I mean is, you do not seem to be a particularly good burglar. You should try something else that you are good at. JOHNNIE- What the hell do you know about it, Eel Capone? What are you in for freaking shit up? Ture! Every Tom, Dick, and Harry were innocent in here. Don't you know that little boy? The tension disruptions like the wind out of his ass easily. Everyone laughs... As it turns out, Johnie had himself a young girlfriend and new 2 baby girls... Johnie's at the end of the row, phone to his ear. On another side of the glass is Bethany, near tears, fussing with a BABY one sucking hard both on her lap, saying I need you and money step up. PUSH IN on Johnie's face as he listens. Her hand on the mesh of the window they try to hold hands. It was the belief of

them on the streets... or his kids growing up not knowing his daddy... that got him to shape up. Whatever it was, something lit a fire under that boy's ass to do the right thing now. Or to just get smarter... Johnie enters, the strut has gone from his step Bradley filing library cards. Saying find a book... and read- or you cannot be here... he stands there looking at me- dumbly... Thing is, see... (leans in, mutters) I do not read... it- not good. I see well it will work on the way you speak also. JOHNIE- I am thinking' I should try for high school equivalency. Hear you helped some fellas with that. BRADLY, I do not waste time on retarders, Johnie. I am not that... he said with the look of giving it a chance. Nothing half-assed if we do all this shit... I do not waste my time on doing something for someone where there is no reward out of it. Johnie thinks too long about it, and then he nods unsure of what he agreed to. Read this out of this book- I cannot... I see... Bradley slaps the book shut, immensely pleased with himself- that he has a new student. Johnnie tries to read as Bradley looks on- dumb shit cannot even read cat and the hat. Bradley shakes his head. Not exactly what I said I would do here boy- you go to school- first and that was it. Bradley chalders the alphabet on a blackboard. How many are there? 30 he said- I look like um-hum! 26! I- Bradley took Johnie under my wing for this all to take place. I- Bradley Started walking him through his ABCs... and 1, 2, 3's. Before long, Bradley started him on his course necessities. He liked the kid, that was part of it. Bequeathed him a delight to help a youngster creep off the shit-heap. But that was not the only reason... Discussing the kiddie book- the boy's face lights up saying wow. Johnie took it well, too. Boy found intelligence he never knew he had-

more in math than any other. None's, verbs, and adjectives... Johnie is strong-minded on a hardback, saying the words. Behind him, wood is piling up on the conveyor belt. After some time, you could not pry those books out of your hands. Something I did not see coming nor did the others like the boys, and the guards also. A smart ass in gear, son! You are putting us behind! Johnie shoves the book in his back pocket and hurries over. Johnie writes a sentence on the blackboard. Bradly steps in to show him how to reconstruct it. Looking around at the Sink, Toilet, Books, Outside the window bars, we hear another TRAIN passing in the night... You could see that I was about done with my railroad model. were Some fellas collect stamps with girls on them. Others build matchstick houses wishing girls were in them. Or things to use at night- I- Bradly built a library. Now he needed a new project and put my train model in there. Johnie was it. It was the same reason he spent years looking after his- lovers there-- posters on the wall his made-up girlies on the wall... it is to keep your mind... and not lose it like Kilts... would coming up. past a chair, a sweater on a hook... and finally to the place of honor on the wall... I chipped more than just my name on the wall. Through now of the wall for the first time, I had to see where I was going to go from here... I called down to the work tunnels... where there was a way out or so I thought I just need to bust the bares. I made a fake dummy to put on my bed and Sam looked over. He had no intention of going. He felt like he was not innocent. The vents will work- if they do not get too small for my wide ass- I thought. In prison, a man does anything to keep his mind occupied. I was digging in the night- as I look for freaks- creeping

in. where the latest poster turns out to be Alicia Silverstone of 1980. That is a big freaking poster of vagina on your face! Yet I thought it was right and fitting for that day.

Gorgeous, she is. Johnie's taking the big test.

Bradly's monitoring the time. Deep silence, save for Johnie's pencil-scribbling. A few old-timers are browsing the shelves, sneaking looks their way. Johnie tries to ignore them. Concentrate. Bradly clears his throat. Time's up. Johnie puts his pencil down, BRADLY- Well that was it? Well, it is for freak... gets up in disgusted- I Lost a whole freaking year of my life here and with this cow-shit! You did fine- you are doing fine... you do not have many more days to go. May as well be in Chinese or something other than this! I know you did fine. He runs around going nuts... guard pots him down... with dugs... I said not to panic.

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I feel bad. I let him down. That is shit, son. He is proud of you; you are like our son... were all Proud of you. We have been friends for a long time. I know him as well as anybody. Smart fella, isn't he? You do not get any more than he... an important thing on the outside. What is he in for anyway? Baby freaking and killing them off... I do not buy it... oh... 'Bout 2 years ago, I was in Indiana on a 2 to 4 stretch. Spray painted the train in front of the grades- and took the man's money and shit out of the engine. The dumb-freak thing to do- yet it was fun. A few months left to go, I got a new cellmate in. Jizzer Latch. Big jittery freaking

twitchier. Crazy eyes looking deep in yes. Kind of roomie, you pray you do not get, not knowing it... you know what I am saying... armed freaking babies- burglary. And ass freak- too- get that... all kinds of hand jobs. Hard to believe, high-strung as he was. Rip a loud fart, he would go 5 feet up in midair. Talked shit all the time, too, that is the other thing you did want to do it as too much or too less. Never shut the freak up. Places he had been, jobs he pulled, little girls he freaked- boys too. Even people he killed- for the fun of it. Folks that did not come for him- or the other way round, cun-ts he called them all- that is how he put it. One evening, like a tale, I say I freaking some young puss you- I say: 'Yeah? Who would you kill doing it?' So, he says... I got me this job one-time working tables at a nightclub- see all the girls wiggle and shit, it was in the 30s so- it was illegal... yet I could case all these big rich pricks that come in. I pick out this guy with this tight ass puss with him, go in one night and do his place, and here... I changed my name, and she falls for it... dumb bitch... though I had money. I freaked her and then I killed her doing it the second time around... and freak after she was cold. A tasty bitch it sucking he said. (He starts laughing and cannot stop it was so freaking creep.) The best skew I ever had- she was so young- and right... Do me and shit. That is the best part! She is freaking me hardcore, and I pop her full of lead in the head. Yet the best part she married to some hotshot... and looked in at us... and he is the one the nail it on. Laughter makes my skin claw- and buggy. The evil in this man's eyes was chilling.

I loved her... I guess I could not show it enough... She was gorgeous...

BRADLY- My wife used to say I am a hard man to get to know. I did not pull the trigger. But I drove her away. That is why she died. Because of me, the way I am- never happy with what I have or had. Like a closed book you do not want to read for the cover. They criticized me for it all the time she could. I killed her, Sam... not love her the right way. (Softly he said this.) Bradly finally glances at Sam, seeking a reaction. Silence. That does not make you a murderer. Bad husband, that all a sinner too yet we all are. Bradly smiles faintly despite himself. Sam gives his shoulder a squash. No. I did not. Someone else did, and I wound up here. Bad break, I conjecture. Feel debauched about it if you want. It floats around. Must land on somebody. Say a storm comes through. Some folks sit in the living rooms and enjoy the rain. The house next door got torn out of the ground and smashed the flat. But you did not pull the trigger, you just were not there but you did what you thought was right at the time. No- not even... I said back. When I got a long white beard and about three marbles left rolling around upstairs. Jesus Bad fortune? It was my turn, that is all. I was in the path of the twister. (Softly he said) I just had no idea the storm would go on if it had. (Glances at him with the look of going mad) Think you will ever get out of here? SAM Sure. I said where I would go- I just might- one of these lost & lonely nights... if only in my mind... like a trip.

Some Diminutive place right on the Pacific. Do you know what the Enchanted Islands...say about the Pacific? They say it has no recollection or readmission. That is where I would like to finish my life, Sam. A warm place with

no memories. Open a little hotel right on the beach. Buy some worthless old boat and fix it up like new. Take my guests out charter passing. (Beat...) You know, a place like that, I would need a man who can get things. Sam stares at Bradley, laughs. SAM Jesus, Bradley. I could not hack it on the outside. Been in here too long. I am an institutional man now.

Like old Hatlen was. You misjudge yourself, I said to him. SAM Bullshit. In here I am the guy who can get it for you. Out there, all you need are Yellow Pages. I would not know where to begin. (Derisive snort) The Pacific Ocean? Hello. Like to scare me to death, something' that big. You are right. It is down there, and I am here. It comes down to a humble sanction. Become full breathing hard and heavy or get busy taking the last breath. BRADLY- Not me. I did not shoot my wife and I did not shoot her lover, and whatever mistakes I made I've paid for and then some. That hotel and that boat... I do not think it is too much to want. To look at the stars just after sunset. Touch the sand. Wade in the water... Feel free. damn it, Bradley, stop! Do not do that to yourself! Talking shitty shit dreams! The Bahamas is over there, and you are in here, and that is the way it is! It used to it; Sam snaps a look. Sam lunges to his feet. What does that mean? Bradley rises and treads away. Bradley? (Turns back to give that last loving look.) Sam, if you ever get out of here, do me a favor. There is this big sunflower field up near Nicktown. Do you know where Nicktown is? Lots of Sunflower fields there. One in the individual that I love- that we loved- it has a long creak running by it... with an old home that was falling in over the way... wall with a big oak at the north end.

Like something out of a Marcel Ray Duriez Book. It is where I asked my it have sex with me... 'So beautiful,' she breathed. 'Mm, and the view's not so bad either,' he said. She turned around to face him, rolling her eyes. She tucked her fingers into the front of his pants, admiring his strong jawline as he wrestled the cork from the bottle. Even if she always managed to open them more easily, it was all about these little traditions. 'You make that joke every time.' 'And I still mean it. Even when you roll your eyes around like that. But now that I have torn your eyes away from the beautiful night sky, may I interest the lady in some champagne?' She closed her eyes and lifted her gaping mouth expectantly, bracing for the sharp sweet tang of the bubbles in her mouth.

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With a final squeak and a pop, he tossed the cork aside and gave her his best Sarah Connery eyebrow raise- she was my girl. Instead, a few drops hit her lips while a steady stream hit her chin and ran down her chest, soaking the top of her blouse. 'I seem to have forgotten the glasses, my dear girl. You will have to open wide.' 'Brad!' she wheezed, forgetting for a moment to whisper. 'On it, miss. Many apologies: cannot imagine how that happened.' Without missing a beat, he began unbuttoning her shirt and noisily kissing and licking his way from her collarbone to her sternum. Down he followed the middle of her petite frame, now shaking with laughter until he was on his knees at her feet. She clasped her hands behind his head and looked down into his large brown eyes, which looked more

mischievous than usual. ‘Well, jeez, now that I’m all wet,’ she began, bending—with just a little—to join him on the ground. ‘Wait for just a sec.’ He reached among the blankets and pulled out a small black box. Placing the champagne down, he flicked the open box and held it up for her. ‘I have something I would like to propose. ’In the poor light, all Caroline could see within the box was a thick gold band. ‘Brad,’ that is not a ring, is it? You remember that we are married, right?’ ‘While I would marry you again 50 times over, no, this isn’t a ring.’ He looked down and began fumbling with the box. ‘Just let me turn it on...’ He held it up triumphantly as it began buzzing. ‘Someone has been leaving their browser open. I can take a hint.’ ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ she started, pulling up her skirt. ‘Mm, is that so? Hmmm,’ he murmured; mouth muffled against her soft inner thigh. With both arms cupping the back of her legs, he continued to voice his disbelief; first along her left thigh, across her delicate cleft, and then back down the right. Jutting his chin firmly under her, he looked up into her eyes, half-closed with pleasure as she leaned against the wall and held onto the back of his head with her other arm. ‘After a thorough investigation, I have to find your claims of innocence to be completely spurious ma’am.’ ‘Shuh. Shut up,’ she laughed and pushed his head gently back toward her. His tongue obliged, flat and pushing forward along her, then curling back as he pulled it upward to her clit. She shivered and placed a knee on his shoulder as he delved forward and back, each time pausing longer to suck gently as she moaned and squirmed in his grasp. With the tapered edge of the toy, he began entering her shallowly, each time letting

it linger for just a half-second longer. 'Please,' she said, grasping at his hair with no longer gentle tugs. Obliging, he bit gently at her thigh while inserting it and admired the glint of gold against her tawny skin. He stood, his fingers pressing it in place from within and watched as she writhed against the vibrations. She pulled him close; leg lifting in his grasp to urge him deeper. Promise me, Sam. If you ever get out, find that spot. In the base of that wall, you will find an old car here inside you will get what you need... what is in this 55 Chevy. You will find something buried in the set... under it I want you to have it what we had. With her other hand, she fumbled around him to undo his belt, grimacing in frustration. He chuckled and released her, undoing his belt slowly as she explored the sensations of the toy against herself. She flicked her eyes at his cock, an invitation, and a challenge. With a loose grip, he ran his hand up and down his shaft, enjoying his show as much as hers. 'Turn around,' his voice now hoarse with want rather than an effort to be quiet. She gave a slow, mocking turn and stuck her ass out at him, using her hand now to grind against the vibe with a slow, deliberately taunting. He stepped toward her and lifted her hips, entering her so hurriedly he barely registered her deepened moan. Each thrust sent shock waves down the underside of his cock and throughout his entire body. Their left arms intertwined on the top of the ledge, using it for leverage as their right hands clasped at her cunt. wife to marry me. We had gone for a picnic. We made love under that tree. I asked and she said yes. You remember being that age.' 'Barely!' Their guffaws faded and Brian kissed Caroline's neck. 'They are right you know. We are acting like kids.' What? What is

in there? You will just have to pry that up and see. Bradley turns and walks away.
Lost in Silence....

Johnie has finished his story. Sam is stunned...but Bradley looks like he has been smacked with a two by four or it was off his ass the look of pain man. Walks stiffly away. Does not look back. Well. I have to say, that is the most astonishing story I ever heard. What amazes me most is you were taken in by it yet not me. Said- MARQUEZ... all together... in-between the shelves. I said back... MARQUEZ- It is obvious this fellow Williams is impressed with you. He hears your tale of grief and quite naturally wants to applaud you with his made-up stays. He is undeveloped, not bright. Not surprisingly he did not know what state he had put you in. BRADLY, he is telling the truth. MARQUEZ Let us say for a moment man is real. You think he would just fall to his knees and cry, 'Absolutely, I did it! I confess! Please add 3 life terms to my sentence!' It could help... Well, it is a chance. isn't it? How can you be so simple-minded? What did you call me...? I was just trying to rest your mind at ease, that is all. Thickheaded if you are well! Is it deliberate? The club will have its name on and resets that on them! If you want to ponder this make-believe, that is your business. Do not make it mine. This meeting's over. Look, if it is the squeeze, do not worry. I would never say what goes on here. I would be just as prosecutable as you for laundering the money and having the girls! Do not you ever mention money or girls to me again, you repentant freaking bitch! Not in this place of work, not anyplace! Get in here! Now! 3 graduates drag him off to the hole where he rioted for 5 weeks...Bradly gets

dragged away, kicking, and screaming like a newborn: Don't you understand it is my life? I could get out or have less time. Mail call. Men crowd around as names are called out. Sam and the boys are parked on the bleachers. CHUB and Clef- say 3 months in the hole. The longest damn stretch I ever heard of. JOHNIE- It is my fault for saying shit. SAM- Like hell. You did not pull the trigger, and you did not convince him, did you know, so do not think about it. STAN- Sam? Are you saying Bradley's innocent? I mean for the real innocent. (Sam nods and looks at me) Sweet baby Jesus. How long has he been here? 30 years. Numb-nuts you have mailed the graduate said. Board of Education. I mailed it to you both... You going to open it or rub yourself off a little more... rub sound better. I do not want to see this... hey, look at this you out high marks. FOOTSTEPS approach slowly to see the girl sitting there. Johnie makes his way through the chaos, finds Beth and the baby waiting behind the thick plexi shield. He sits, does not pick up the phone. Just stare at Beth. She does not know what to make of it. He presses a piece of paper against the glass. A high school diplomas. Her face lights up, blinking back tears. The steel door. Somewhere behind it, unseen is Bradley, A rat scurries along the wall. Bradley listens in darkness. The FOOTSTEPS pause outside his door. The slot opens. An ELDERLY GUARD peers in. An OLD GUARD Kid passed the big time. B+- above average.

Alleged you would like to know this happy for your boy.

The slot closes. The FOOTSTEPS recede. Bradley smiles. We find Johnnie in the evening work detail, mopping the floors with bucket and pail. Warden wants to talk. A steel door rattles open. Mert leads Johnnie outside to a gate, unlocks it. Johnnie ensues out across loading-dock access for the shops and mills. Some vehicles parked. The place is deserted. He stops, sensing a presence. Johnnie looks around. Here... outside the walls? The gate opens, sends Johnnie through, turns, and heads back inside. Warden? Marquez steps into the light out of the black darkness. MARQUEZ- I give you a girl in here to keep you from talking... we have a situation here. I think you can appreciate that if you had your girl once and a while... I would but no... he said... it is not right I am a changed man. He said- this came along and bashed my wind out of me. MARQUEZ- I tell you, son, it has me up nights knowing this is wrong, that is the God truth. MARQUEZ- The right decision. Sometimes it is hard to figure out what that is... you say no, so I make it for you- you comprehend that? (Johnnie nods) Think hard, Johnnie. If I am going to move on this, there cannot be the least little sh-Sam of the doubt. Would you be willing to swear before a judge and jury...having placed your hand on the Good Book and taken an oath before Almighty God Himself? Just give me that chance... do the right thing and no- I have my girl. She will be mine if you keep saying shit. I must know if what you told him was the truth. Marquez pulls a pack of cigarettes, offers Johnnie a smoke. Johnnie takes one.

Marquez lights both cigarettes pocket his lighter.

Yes, sir. He said with nerves. That is what

I thought. Marquez drops his cigarette. Brushes it out with the toe of his shoe. Glances up toward the plate shop roof as a go-through scope pops up into the frame, jumping Johnie's image into startling intensification, framed in the crosshairs. Rapid fires a carbine- BAM! BAM! BAM! bam! his face lit up by the muzzle flashes. Captain Flackier. gets chewed to pieces by the gunfire. He smacks the ground in a twitching, thrashing heap. Eyes wide and staring. Dead. Surprise still stamped on his face. Silence now. Marquez turns strolls into darkness. Dumb freak...GUARDS approach Bradly's cell. The door is unlocked. Bradly emerges slowly, blinking painfully at the light. Bradly has marched along. Convicts stop staring. Bradly is led in. The door is closed. Alone with Marquez. Softly...

BRADLY- I am done. It stops right now. Get H&R Block to declare your income.

MARQUEZ- creep- creep- creeping away- like a snake in the night- like your ass hole of a boyfriend, he freaks you and is done. Terrible thing. Man, that young, less than a year to go, trying to escape. It Broke Captain Flacker's heart to shoot him, truly it did. Marquez lunges to his feet, eyes sparkling with rage. As he looks at this man part naked in his hole... bared in his shit. NO- I do not think so-0. Otherwise, you will have the hardest time there is in this place. No more protection from the guards. I will pull you out of that one-bunk Hilton and put you in a padded room with all the dick suckers... like all the biggest bull queer I can find. 'You'll think you got freaked by a runaway night train!' And the library? Gone! Sealed off brick by brick! We will have a little book barbecue in the yard! They will see the flames

for miles! We will dance around it like uninhabited Indians! Do you comprehend me in my mindless ways? Are you catching my drift... or are you the dumb ass? Bradley's face. Eyes tunneling. His beaten appearance says it all... Sam finds Bradley sitting in the shadow of the high stone wall, poking lethargically through the dust for small pebbles. Sam waits for some acknowledgment. Bradley does not even look up. Sam hunkers down and joins him. Nothing has been said for the longest time. And then, softly: I tell you, the man was talking' crazy. I am worried, I truly am. He said to the boys.

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We ought to keep an eye on him. KLIT'S That's fine, during the day. But at night he has that cell all to himself. STAN Oh Lord. Bradley comes down to the loading dock today. Asked me for a length of rope. 4foot long. Do you think he is going to? clef Shit! Did you give it to him? End it yah... STAN Sure I did. I mean why wouldn't I? CHUB Remember what happened to Dick.

STAN How the hell was I supposed to know? KLIT'S

Bradley's never done that. Never. They all look to Sam. SAM Every man's got a breaking point. Report to your cell blocks for evening count. BOOM DOWN to Sam and the boys. Convicts drift past them. CHUB Where the hell is he? STAN is Still up in the wardens.

TOWER GUARD (via a loudspeaker) YOU MEN! YOU HEAR

IS THAT ANNOUNCEMENT OR ZEST TOO STUPID TO UNDERSTAND? CHUB Nothing, we can do. Not tonight. STAN Let us pull him aside tomorrow, all of us. Have a word with him. Isn't that right, Sam? SAM (disbelieving) Yeah. Sure. That is right. Bradley's working away. Marquez pokes his head in. Bradley finally gets his head through, scraping his ears. He has a penlight clenched in his teeth. He peers down into the shaft. At the very bottom, 50 feet down, a big ceramic pipe runs the length of the cellblock. Beneath its coat of grime and dust, the word 'SEWER' is stenciled.

MARQUEZ Lickety-split. I want to get home. BRADLY

About done, sir. BRADLY Three deposits tonight. We follow Marquez to his wife's sampler. He swings it aside, works the combination dial, and opens the wall safely. Bradley moves up, shoves in the black ledger, and files. Marquez shuts the safe. Bradley hands him the envelopes. Marquez heads for the door. MARQUEZ Get my stuff down the laundry. And shine my shoes. I want 'em to look' like mirrors. (Pauses at door) Nice having' you back, Bradley. The place just was not the same without you... Marquez exits. Bradley turns to the laundry. He opens the shoebox. Nice pair of dress shoes inside. He sighs, glances down at the old, ragged pair of work shoes on his own feet. Bradley is diligently shining Marquez's shoes. Bradley trudges down the hallway, laundry slung over his shoulder, Bradley nods to the GUARD. The guard BUZZES him through. Sam hears Bradley coming, moves to the bars. He watches Bradley come up to the second tier and pause before his cell.

Open number 14! Bradly gazes directly at Sam. A beat of eye contact. Sam shakes his head. Do not do it. Bradly smiles, eerily calm...and enters his cell. The door closes. KATHUMP! We held on to Sam's face. Bradly is polishing a chess piece. Lights out! The lights bump off. He finishes polishing, holds up the piece to admire. A pawn. He sets it down with the others -- and we realize it is the final glance for the board. A full set. He gazes up at Raquel and smiles. Pulls a 4-foot length rope from under his pillow. Let us uncoil the floor. Brad- hopped a train to his freedom- along with getting his cash under the viaduct! Along with all the money he made for the warden and the guards... along with making it a book!

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Suddenly, a palm-sized chunk of cement popped free and hit the floor, that is when he knew it was possible. He stares down at it. Bradly lies in the dark, studying the chunk of concrete in his hands. Considering the possibilities. Wrestling with hope. Bradly stands to peer at the small hole left by the fallen chunk. Carefully runs his fingertip over it. Mining is the study of force and phase. That is all it takes. Force and phase. That and a big damn poster, on the wall, showing the way into her hole- of freed and joy! HA! Sam sits in the dark, a bundle of nerves, trying to hold himself still. He feels like he might scream or shake to pieces. The second's tick by, each an eternity. I have had some long nights in the stir. Alone in the dark with nothing but your thoughts, time can draw out like a blade... A FLASH OF LIGHTNING outside his window sends harsh balsam

shadows jittering across the cell. A storm breaking. That was the longest night of my life... the last night I saw my friend. HAIG Brad, dammit, you are putting me behind! You better be sick or dead in there, I shit you not! KATHUMP! The expert lock is thrown. The cons emerge from their cells and the headcount begins. Sam looks back to see if Bradly's in line. He is not. Suddenly the count stalls: GUARD Man missing on tier two! Cell 12! The head bull, HAIG, checks his list: Brad? Get your ass out here, boy! You are holding up the show! (No answer) looking at the dummies...Don't make me come down there now! I will thump your skull for you! Still no answer. Glaring, Haig stalks down the tier, clipboard in hand. His men fall in behind. They arrive at bars. Their faces go slack. Stunned. Softly: Digging muddy tunnel 700 yards that lead into a shit toenail that was another 500 to freedom get this next to the courthouse, out of a utility access hole cover, also that sent him there in the first place. Right outside the doors, he popped up like a rat in the snow covertness of the night in white. Using nothing but a sharpened toothbrush with a melted razor blade on the blunt end the color Sam. The warden though one of his collectibles mouth organs through the Sam head poster funny hitting and going through the vagina of the nude front shot of Alicia Silverstone- you know the one with the red and white coat- slow his fingers went in there- and the hole was whined. The train takes him away off hop-off gets the cone to hope back on in the next passing one to his place in the Brahmas. Where I would blow all the warden's money! Oh, my Holy God. reveals the cell is empty. Everything is tidy. Even the bunk is stowed. They wrench the door open and rush in, tossing the

cell in a panic as if Bradly might be lurking under the Kleenex or the toothpaste. spins toward us, bellowing at the top of his lungs: WHAT THE FREAK! Marquez is kicking back with the morning paper. He notices how dingy his shoes are. He glances at the shoebox on the desk. kicks his shoes off, opens the box -- and gulls out Bradly's grimy work shoes. He stares blankly. What a freak indeed. An ALARM STARTS BLARING throughout the prison. He looks up. Marquez and

Flackier stride across the grounds, ALARM BLARING.

MARQUEZ, I want every member of staff on that cellblock questioned! Start with that friend of his! FLAKIER who? Sam watches as Marquez storms up with an entourage of guards. MARQUEZ Him. Sam's eyes widen. Guards yank him from his cell. Marquez steps to the center of the room, working himself up into a fine rage: What do you mean 'he just wasn't here?' Do not say that to me, Haig! Do not say that to me again! Look at this thing look real to you- I think not! But sir! He was not! He is not! MARQUEZ I can see that, Crate! Do you think I am simple-minded? Is that what you are saying? Am I a dumb ass? No sir! Marquez grabs the clipboard and thrusts it at Flockier. What about you? Are you blind? Tell me what this is! FLAKIER Last night's count. MARQUEZ You see Brad's name? I sure do! Right there, see? 'Brad.' He was in his cell at the lights went out! NO reason he would still be here this morning! I want him to be found! Not tomorrow, not after breakfast! Now! MARQUEZ Well? SAM Well what?

MARQUEZ, I see you two all the time, you are close, you are! He must 'a said something! SAM No sir, he did not! Marquez spreads his arms evangelist-style, spins slowly around. MARQUEZ Lord! It is a miracle! Man, up and vanished like a girl you just freaked and dumped the same night! Nothing' left but some models and books on the windowsill and that nude young freaking pussy showing on the wall! Let us ask her! She knows! What do you say there, Fuzzy- Britches? Want to talk? Guess not. Why should you be different? Sam exchanges looks with the guards. Even if they are nervous. Marquez scoops a handful of rocks off the sill. He hurls them at the wall one at a time, shattering them, punctuating his words: MARQUEZ It is a conspiracy! His hands- throwing (SMASH- a model train) That's what this is! (SMASH a train car that he made from wood) It is one big damn conspiracy! (SMASH- a boxcar) And everyone is in it! (SMASH- a little water tower) Including her! He sends the last rock whizzing right at the nude girl on the wall. Right for the hole... smash- you could not hit that hard if you were a 16-year-old boy on his first lovemaking. It takes a moment for this to sink in. see this tight ting go all wide... All eyes go to her new hole that was made. The rock went through her puss. You could hear a pin drop. Marquez reaches up, sinks his finger into her dark young- tight freak hole. He keeps pushing... and his entire hand disappears into the wall. I find self-drilling at the sight of this... slowly fingering this girl he was... as Marquez rips the poster from before our eyes. Stunned faces peering at his head went up all in there. to reveal the long crumbling tunnel in the wall. That leads to an underground tunnel- then to the shit passageway- then up a

manhole- then out by the courthouse, next to the tracks that he walked along- it was snowing in the night love agent the flicker lights- you can see him- there looking up... hands up praying and thankful for his freedom, moving fast he runs for the oncoming train- then jumps off a viaduct where he digs up his lout... and under there he stays for the next train for the next town... where he could get clean and start a new look and life... as a new man... He took Jonie's name he was going to be out soon anyway- it was not yet reported... so by the time, it got out it was too late... a guard barely out of his teens tried not to look nervous as they lash a rope around his chest. He is getting instructions from six different people at once. (Flashlight in his hands) looking in He reaches for the opposite wall, manages to snag a steel conduit with his fingers. Suddenly, a huge rat darts his hand. Bradley yanks away and plummets head-first down the shaft. He dangles wildly upside-down for a moment, arms windmilling, then gets his hands pressed firmly against the opposite wall. The rat scurries off, pissed, at the lining of the walls... wet and drizzling with moisture- the smell of metal like- The warden went down in the hole. Um- freshly opened! He was not much in the brains department at this point we could see that, but he possessed feeling up the hole... like a hard dick sliding in a new hole made... with a teen bitch, it was sore and tight squeezing...he was willing to go deep down inside. squeezes down the tunnel on his belly. Dark as midnight. Concrete walls rise on both sides. If you imagine them as two huge flaps on either side- you would get what I am saying- do deep to come out of, no is in this space hardly, and a dark tangle of pipes between the cellblocks was starting to get hot.

Somewhere, a rat SQUEAKS, someone flushed- a shitter and that is when... Smells damn bad, Warden!

It smells just like shit. It is SHIT- it is poppies! Ah god- the man up there said- I giggled my ass off! squeezes from the tunnel, we made the same trap as he did out and up! Showing what it was like- when he did and when numb nuts did it too. The fat ass barely got in the dumb hole! He lost his glass doing this- it was that hard of a freak for him. Into the shaft, he went- the feeling is- nothing but darkness and a small light at the end good this must be with it like when you come out- I just do it backward. Not having an enjoyable time, squeezing through the walls of this passageway. Never mind dumb shits keep going, I said! Just keep going! I want him found he may be down here... Flicker and the warden sink in all the shit lining the tunnel. That when they got blasted with a big wave of shit- in the face... He slips and sits heavily in it. Brad got the last chuckle! Small my ass! The boys said on top! The ladyboys were having an enjoyable time with this one. Sam- He starts laughing. Laughing, hell, he is bellowing laughter, laughing so hard he must hold himself, laughing so hard tears are pouring down his cheeks. The look of rage on Marquez's face makes him laugh all the harder. Abrupt silence- I lost it- one for him get away with shit and for his shit hitting in the face... it was a win-win... and that was good shit! Shit! I laughed myself right into madness- the boys loved it though. I knew I did not want to piss them off- for I was hoping to get out... SAM Its shit, its shit, oh my God- it is shit- he fingers her pussy- and shit... then a boy said (then shot himself because!) HA! He starts laughing all over again, fit to split.

(That IS the tightest one he ever got!) Virgin landscape THIS WAS. FUNNY IT WAS ALL THE SAME TO HIM TOO.

33

Charming rural road. Suddenly, State Police Cruisers rocket up the road with SIRENS AND LIGHTS. In 1991, Bradly Brad escaped from EBENSBURGH Prison. At age 69... EBENSBURG is half a mile distant from where he got out. All that was left behind was a prison uniform by the creek under the viaduct with and body wash. as well as a coal miner's- hammer with the pick side damn near worn down to the handle. And a miner's orange hard hat with a lamp! Cops all over the town and around- posing with Bradly's reeking uniform and the worn rock-hammer the photo made the papers- and news. Bradly loved working underground. I fancy it fascinated him in his strategic ways. A dying tree here- aging there, a million liars there of mountain making- under pressure, seems there- clay there... I remember thinking it would take a man 1000 years to tunnel through the wall and underground with it. Bradly did it in about 50. And the dumb got the last laugh too for it was that good... I keep an eye out yet it dark- and that was when he did his work 6 hours at a time... and the rest was sleep and eat. Like I said. In prison, a man will do no matter what to keep his awareness busy, and not go stir-crazy. All the shit was pushed down in the hole as he dug- or was in the coal bucket. While the rest of us slept, Bradly spent years working the night shift... SAM-I guess after

Johnie was killed, Bradly decided he had been here too long. And he had his name and plan made...

The lights went out. Bradly places the last chess piece. Gazes up at his girlie. Smiles. Pulls the rope from under his pillow. He stands and unbuttons his prison shirt, revealing Marquez's gray pinstripe suit underneath in wild shadows you see his face looking crack in the moment of busting out and though. The storm rages, outside- sown- is the cover of night- Bradly, goes in his girl, carefully having one of Marquez's folded suits into a large industrial Zip-Lock bag- that he had in the shaft the day before. Bradly, again wearing prison clothes, inches down the tunnel.

Bradly squeezes through the hole head-first, just imagine that, and the tape on the top is what covers the hole over. Yet the wind would bubble it up, yet he knew in the dim light it would not be known. Bradly snags the conduit again. He contorts out of the hole and dangles into the shaft. We now see the purpose of the rope, he kicks his legs across the shaft and down, getting his feet braced for the big drop. His back against one wall, and feet against the other, he starts down the shaft. Sliding dangerously. Using pipes for handholds. Flinching as rats dart this way and that, scurrying in the shadows. He drops the last few feet to the bottom. He approaches the ceramic sewer tunnel and kneels before it. No turning back. He wriggles into the pipe and starts crawling. Bradly crept to freedom through Mud-muck and bloody shit stinking filth I cannot even visualize. Or mayhap I just do not

want to do so-0. Snow is falling- EBENSBURGH is a mile and a half distant or so away. Freedom- as he made past the courthouse, that convicted him to this life sentence. He wades upstream, ripping his clothes from his body. He gets his shirt off, spins it through the air over his head, flings the shirt away. He raises his arms to the sky, turning slowly, it is 32 out yet he was more than happy in this... feeling the snow coating him clean. Jubilant and Successful he felt. SAM- The next day... a man nobody ever laid eyes on before marched into the first national Bank of Johnstown. The only thing that changed was that he was John Sr. on paper. I would like to withdraw all my earnings... as this man here... the same name he uses to make the warden what he was... worked. The signature was a spot-on match with the photos. Makeup and hair- can do a lot- I thought. And a Pillow in my pants under this nice site. He had all the proper... license, birth certificate, social security card, it was all there. I must say I am sorry to be dropping your industry. I hope you will enjoy living out of the country. She never said a word- to anyone. I was just some man... Thank you, I said with a smirk. Cash in hand- I walked out... smelling... foolishly. I mailed my manuscript book to the new paper- and was on my way. It was typed- with a pen name... that was that- the name J. B. W.

34

Marquez walks slowly toward his office. Dazed. The morning paper in his hand. He goes wordlessly past the DUTY GUARD into his office. Shut the door. Lays the paper on his desk. The headline reads:

‘VENALITY and young rapping AND MANSLAUGHTER AT
EBENSBURGH.’

Below that, the sub-headline: ‘D.A. Has Ledger.

Indictments Expected.’ Marquez looks up as SIRENS

SWELL in the distance. For the second time, State

Police cruisers go rocketing up the road with SIRENS AND LIGHTS.
Police cruisers everywhere. A media circus. REPORTERS jostle for position. A
colorless DISTRICT ATTORNEY steps forward into CLOSEUP, flanked by a
contingent of STATE TROOPERS. D.A. Flackier? You have the right to remain
silent. If you give up that right, anything you say will be used against you in court...
TROOPERS moves in, cuffing Flacker's hands behind his back. SAM, I hear
Flackier was weeping like a petite pussy looking for it- when they took him away,
where I hear he was ass freaked every day- by our boys! His face scrunches up. He
begins to cry hard. Flackier sobs to the car. The D.A. snaps a gaze up toward
Marquez's window, motions his men to follow. Marquez is staring out the window
as they approach the building. Marquez? We have a warrant for your arrest! Open!
He goes to his desk, opens a drawer. Inside lies a revolver and a box of shells,
where he blasts some of them- and run for the window- falling to his death- and
was killed doing so. His ass was impaled on the fence spike with barb wire-
outside- hilarious he got ass reamed hard- and ripped into two all up in there and
junk- like being freaked by a train, we all said the next day. There is a photo in all

the boy's cells of this... the dead guy getting ass freaked by escapee! SAM- I like to think the last thing, that went through him over then the spiked up his ass... was to wonder how the freak, brad was able to ass freak him over so well in this joke that was made by GOD! And get the best of him- see God well discipline you for being the ass hole... that needs to be freaked.

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I wonder if he made it... I remember where he said he would go... but I never- ever thought I would see the day I would want to go there... yet it was for him... When I picture him heading south on a ship it makes me laugh all over again... it is shit! Then seeing him in a speedboat rip along with some hot young thing... make that all better also. Bradly Brad, who crept through a tonal girl's hole passed all poppies next to it and arose farm and strong- out a hole like a rebirth on the other side. Bradly Brad headed for the blue-green seas. I miss him here... we talk about him a lot... and remain... the shit he did... beautiful white beach. The Pacific Ocean before us.

Huge. Mind-blowing. Beautiful beyond description. All we hear now is the gentle sound of waves. dreams where I am lost in a warm place with no reminiscence. The ocean was so big it struck me foolishly. Waves so quiet they strike me dead. The sunshine is so bright it strikes me blind. It is a place that is sapphire beyond reason. Bluer than can exist. Azure than my mind can grasp. Nothing for a million miles but beach, sky, and water. Sam is a speck at the water's

edge. Just another grain of sand. Sam enters, sits. 10 years older than he last saw him. Either way, I made all the trips to get home and find my way- to freedom... it was all part of his plan to show me that I need not give up on life on the outside. A distant boat lies on its side in the sand like an old wreck that has been left to rot in the sun. There is someone out there. A MAN is meticulously stripping the old paint and varnish by hand, the face was hidden with goggles and kerchief mask. Sam appears bag, a distant figure walking out across the sand, wearing his cheap suit, and carrying his cheap bag. The man on the boat pauses. Turns slowly around. Sam arrives with a smile as wide as the horizon. The other man raises his goggles and pulls down his mask. Bradly, of course. BRADLY, you look like a man who knows how to get things. SAM-I am known to locate certain things from time to time. Sam shrugs off his jacket and picks up a sander. Together, they start sanding the hull as we... I see you have a little girl now and a new wife... you made boy you made it... and they all group huge.

A photo was taken one that no one can ever see!

Interval: Incest

Nevaeh on tape- from 2007- 'I will never- ever be more than a simple-minded n*gger- yet I am not black, and white than white a white girl should be, from not seeing the sun. Never a true woman- or a man- if you are like me, having the skin jacket of symbolically placed covering your true being, with a new characteristic of repugnance, likewise and education to match- within the laws and

segments of a small town that well role my world individualities. Never dating- unless tricked into what is allotted, never accomplishing, work, or learning- unless it is for charities, or to do over- to never truly earn due to lack of mind and the thought of the color of black in its new ways to offend, like a slave that- I am to them, that have me ambushed.'

'Already the police officers what to f*ck the shit out of me, by them being a d*ck. Over time, I wonder if it was all just to do detective work- and that was code.' Said Nevaeh.

'I wonder if they know of Dr. Floyd and Dr. Kinsey sexologist, with their fascinations.'

(Giggles for the doctor)

'I named the two guys that are my probation- officers: 'burp' and 'slurp' as they were taking photos of me to publicize my simpleton ways- to libel, saying what his camera is all f*cked up, and the other cramming a turkey sub down his gut- to make theatrical performances. Nonetheless both- looking at me as if I am a deviant, that is why- I am here- oh, how lies have fed this legend of my existence.'

~*~

The year was 2008- it was 12- 'Nevaeh was the only girl, that could slobber up,' this was lost in her memories of her boy-toy saying, and it did not

slobber, 'don't think too hard, he posted to his message board.' 'She has pictures of this. To let all know I am her man.'

Nevaeh on tape- 'Everything you have viewed is a lie, why are you still breathing, I should cut your tie, or cut your eyes from the inside, over you then ask why? Now ask if you can see- and say goodbye to the bad girl?'

(Forward, what 2 years can do.)

2010- I was 14, and this was my last true year, and I stopped chatting with the doctor who I trusted, to understand me the misunderstood- 'I still remember when- I met her the little girl in the blue skirt, on the bus, and made sweet notes and the rest is history too- with me. She is my everything, my time-machine- all I thought about to keep my mind occupied- after her, this was the last loss I could take.'

(Back)

It was 1999. DOCTOR LORENZO'S OFFICE, they were going over the drama that was her life in the photograph.

Nevaeh- is on the couch and- giving her life's history.

DOCTOR LORENZO her desk tapping her pen- and clicking the top. 'Two years? You were with this boy, and no one knew?' 'He was nothing more than a crush...' She spoke. 'However- she was my fascination.'

Nevaeh- 'I was looking down at too many coffins, in my mind- I could see them all, always and he- or the love or the thought of love a boy was my escape. In the ground, and it is all over me.'

'You need to spend more time with girls your age and learn to trust,' said the doctor.

'I wanted ...to jump and just play. To be down there... with her... not long after and playing was odd. I never was a small child or do not remember being one.'

'Death was everything that was fascinating, people were crying... yet that was me all the time, at any time. It was like then I could see my own death, yet it was emptiness- and cold. And there was no one there...'

(Memories of Flashbacks)

(Back)

Your baby is dead. 'We're so sorry. A terrifying loss, we are so grieved... There's zip, else we can do- but let her run out of oxygen. Leah reels, her world became upside-down. Emotional free-fall. Harsh lights overhead-THUNDER rumbles outdoor. Leah's on a delivery table, legs previously in the stirrups. A sheet hangs- across her belly so we cannot see what is going on below her waist.

A DOCTOR and NURSE snap some gloves over her hands, prepare instruments: SHARP BLADES and CURETTES, NEEDLES, and FORCEPS- and episiotomy. A stricken grandma from the mother's side. Leah tries to sit up. She has pure beauty and is very pregnant, propped up in a bed wearing a hospital gown. A heart Allison monitor BEEPS. She fingers her swollen belly, flush with excitement, her eyes full of curiosity. Okay, just relax. Now- This'll be over fifth ten-year-old Leah is the child of Ms. Amzel before you know it, you will have your two girls- out of three. And we will see...

Leah looks up. Her smile falters as we REVEAL: Wait, I have changed my mind. I do not want to do this anymore. The Doctor gives the Nurse an eased look. The Nurse takes Allison's hand, eases her back onto the table.

‘No, this is not what is supposed to happen. My baby's alive!’

But it is still alive! It is moving! Feel it, you can feel it! Leah tries to put the Nurse's hand on her. Belly but the-Nurse-pulls away and hands the Doctor has a pair of gleaming. Blunt-tipped SURGICAL SCISSORS. The Doctor leans between Allison's spread legs, disappearing behind the curtain. Allison gasps.

No, stop! I want to fall asleep!

‘Too late for Naddalin.’ The baby's coming. You are. Going to experience pressure now... Leah winces and bites her lip as the Doctor goes about his unseen work. A GOOD-LOOKING MAN in surgical scrubs stands behind him.

Bizarrely, he is videotaping the whole thing. Grama's husband, PAPA (late 50's).
He smiles at her from behind -the camera.

It is okay, honey- You're doing great! The Doctor hands the scissors,
now slick with gore, to the Nurse. He takes SUCTION. CATHETER and
disappears behind the curtain again. The Nurse - presses a button on a vacuum
pump and the machine begins to HUM. Leah tightly closes her eyes.

This is not occurring. Wake up, wake up, wake up... Abruptly - the thin
wail of a BABY CRYING. Allison's eyes go wide with fright as the smiling Nurse
addresses a wriggling bunch wrapped in a blanket. Blood leaks through the pink
fabric. We cannot see what is within, but it is moving. Moreover, it is Bellowing.

(Present Time of 1999)

I- Nevaeh slowly walked toward the open grave and then... the next thing
I was aware of was I was in school. Merely a new class- a new town and a new life
and a new last name- and I do not remember anything. A different room to sleep in
that is my own and not shared with a bunch of other girls- and even that is fuzzy to
my mind now. With Mrs. Henderson! Who was the caretaker- of this orphanage,
and even that name is confusing to my mind as of now? Nonetheless, I was taught
fifth grade yet never that old- even I knew that. I was in third grade- not even that!

DOCTOR LORENZO- And there was no active consciousness, between
the two periods, she said she works for the school, yet that is not so-o?

Nevaeh- No- not... No- I was so confused. I was so embarrassed, did not look right- did not feel right- and my mind and body were having out-of-body experiences. Mrs. Henderson. She was asking me to do an equation. Out loud- Fractions. I did not know fractions. I did not even know the timetables. I still have trouble.

DOCTOR LORENZO Because you, Nevaeh, the waking self, never learned them. But your alternate selves did and held them for you.

(With her I try to remember)

-And-

The flashbacks start...

...Congratulations, Ms. Amzel. It is their girls. The L.P.N offers her the bloody, blanketed bundle. Leah screams- then catch awake. She has been possessing visions. Papa rests next to her in bed. Be stirs but does not wake. Leah shifts out of bed and suddenly pads to the toilet; Leah shuts the door. We now see that she is not pregnant, only in her horror. She urges the cold tiles in the dark, a hand on her flat belly as she commences to sob...

Liquid Streams in a little Zen fountain. Leah sits opposite from- DR. - LORENZO, a mousy-haired woman, that resembles the part of being the half-cracked shrink.

'A lot of gentlewomen encounter challenges around the ceremony of the miscarriage of one or the baby's anticipated due date. It is utterly normal.' She spoke.

'I was considering going back to work. I was doing enough.' Said Leah. 'You are darling. Think about where you were just four months ago. Looking off at a far wall Leah's look,) are you still under probation? Leah shifts. Dr. Lorenzo gives her a keen-edged examination.

(Forward to 2003)

Nevaeh- at the age of 7 Nevaeh is far more developed than most her age- in talking and understanding of comprehension- 'They stole them from me! I am ashamed every time, I am forced to do the calculation.'

'What did they still hear from you?' asked the doctor.

'Everything... she went on to say...' Said, Nevaeh.

DOCTOR WILUBR- Nevaeh- 'Would you object to being mesmerized?'

Nevaeh- 'Would that be Christian?'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'I... I think self-hypnosis would be deemed materialistic. It would also give me easier access to the other selves you may have within the deeps and cobwebs of your mind. and we were going to blow the dust off.'

Nevaeh- I do not know...I do not think my father would like it...

DOCTOR LORENZO- Nevaeh, we now have one of the reasons, the main goal for DOCTOR LORENZO- your fragmentation.

Nevertheless- without awareness of the primary experience that created this, without being able to trace the split back to its core root, we cannot wish to reunite yourselves into a whole.

(Nevaeh- nods and folds her hands into her lap- like a young little lady.)

Okay- soon just listen. Try to block everything else out. The room, the couch... just you and me.

SEE THE AIR AS MANY DIFFERENT COLORS. AND THEN
BREATHE IN THE COLOR OF YOUR CHOICE. CONCENTRATE AND
HOLD ON TO THAT COLOR AND MY VOICE.

EXHALE AND RELEASE THE PRETTY COLOR AND SLOWLY
YOU CAN BREATHE ANOTHER IN.

IN AND OUT UNTIL YOU FEEL YOU'RE READY TO BEGIN...

Nevaeh- Start.

(The SELVES appear, lined up UPSTAGE.)

DOCTOR LORENZO Alright. Nevaeh-. May I speak to De? (DE steps forward.)

Nevaeh- (As De.) Bonjour, Doctor Lorenzo.

'Maybe she is a psychic medium?' She thought to herself.

DOCTOR LORENZO Bonjour, De. De, the moment at the Same of Nevaeh's granddaddy's grave. Was it you who stopped Nevaeh- from jumping in?

Nevaeh- None. I had not yet arrived. That was Janny.

DOCTOR LORENZO, May I speak to Janny?

(DE steps back and JANNY steps out.)

DOCTOR LORENZO Janny. Do you remember when Grandma- was buried?

'Yes, yes I do.' She spoke.

Nevaeh- (As JANNY.)

'Course I do.'

Nevaeh- was pondering stupid thoughts. Like how cold everything was. What a freezing blue with brown specs, the cold was. 'How Gramma was under there, away from the blue. That Gramma was love but not melancholy. But I do not think that is right...'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'How do you mean, Janny?'

Nevaeh- 'I think blue can be love. Don't you? Summer skies are blue.
The warm river water is blue.'

(She strokes the divan.) This couch is blue...

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'So you were fully aware of what...' Nevaeh- was
thinking before she stepped forward? 'You hadn't just arrived when you saved her.'

Nevaeh- 'Nah. I have been around a while.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Although you still don't recall your first
memory?'

(Nevaeh- shakes her head.)

Janny, do you know your multiplication tables and even trigonometry?

Nevaeh- 'Sure do. I am a whiz at math!'

More dependable than De or Amy even!

ONE time ONE IS ONE AND ONE TIMES TWO IS TWO.

EACH NUMBER TIMES ITSELF'S THE SAME TILL INFINITY IS
THROUGH.

TWO TIMES ONE IS TWO BUT TWO TIMES TWO IS FOUR! JUST
DOUBLE UP EACH NUMBER TILL YOU CAN'T DOUBLE UP NO MORE.

Nevaeh- 'THREE TIMES ONE IS THREE AGAIN AND TWO TIMES THREE IS SIX.

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'That's very immeasurable, Janny.'

Nevaeh- 'THREE TIMES THREE IS NINE AND THEN WE ADD FOUR TO THE MIX! SELVES AND WHEN YOU ADD FOUR TO THE MIX, THEN YOU CAN SEE THE TABLES TRICKS! NESSA CAUSE THREE TIMES FOUR IS TWELVE MARJORIE LIKE TWO TIMES SIX IS TWELVE! DE THE TABLES START TO CRISS AND CROSS THE FURTHER THAT WE DELVE.'

Nevaeh- 'CAUSE THREE TIMES EIGHT IS SELVES TWENTY-FOUR!'

Nevaeh- 'AND FOUR TIMES SIX IS SELVES TWENTY-FOUR!'

Nevaeh- 'EXPAND THE TABLES A LITTLE MORE...'

Nevaeh- 'AND SELVES THEN TWO TIMES TWELVE IS TWENTY-FOUR!'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Well, that is very tolerant and good overall. So, you all know your tables?'

(THEY nod.)

Obeyes- Nevaeh...

DOCTOR LORENZO- Nevaeh, was not there.

'Not always she thinks unlike I do. Lost within another part of the 'papillon' of the mind.'

'The butterfly effects.' She questioned.

At that moment at that time- Nevaeh is biting on her diamond neckless.

'You hear other voices in your head?'

'SRA & Trauma-Based Mind Control.' She thought. Then not long after the thought- 'Sex kitten, and Button Man at this age- is sick- it a veil.'

'Sometimes they move me, without me doing it like mental telepathy.'

Nevaeh said- 'Yep- at 6 I found out were my cum comes from, I remember- cervix stretching wide with speculum and sperm insertion in my uterus they even put that small rod in that little hole deep in.'

'Papa even funneled his stiff in me young a plastic funnel- with a long tube, to see if I could get parent- as it was rubbed outside of me, then pushed in with a large Q-tip. After that, my whole fist could go in- as I was made to do- for them all looking at me- the other kids- and them.' She cries.

I REMEMBER IT ALL- them looking at me all the other kids, and him- at the orphan- I was holding out my tongue- 'That's a heavy load she takes in her mouth, let no run out now- swallow.' And there were homemade videos, and I am

sure the others will find a way someday to exploit them- to shame me- with the Svakom Gaga showing the ins and outs of me.

'That is why- I could love her and not care, LOVE IS LOVE!'

'You feel like an experiment.' she demanded.

On tape- 'It's not love- its lack of options.' I wanted her, I needed her, yet I could never really love Lily- yet I did anyway.' Said Nevaeh some years later. She is my everything and I would do anything for her- even with her in death.'

'As if in the lab as a rat of Doctor Josef Mengele practices.' Said, Nevaeh shooting.

Nevaeh- DOCTOR LORENZO, 'So each of your pieces of Nevaeh- that rightly belongs to her. Janny, the times tables. Nessa, you play the piano beautifully, but Nevaeh- cannot play a note. Amy Lou, you hold Nevaeh's philosophy of antiquity. De, the social graces that a young girl normally would have learned during the two formative years she was gone.'

Nevaeh- (As Mary, steps forward.)

But Doctor Lorenzo, dear. How is that possible?

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Because, Mary, you are pieces of Nevaeh- Fragments of Nevaeh- that contain different attributes, different skills, mixed emotions.'

Nevaeh- (AS Janny.)

‘I don’t get your drift...’

DOCTOR LORENZO- (Thinks.)

‘Alright, in multiplication what is the number one referred to?’

Nevaeh- ‘The identification.’

DOCTOR LORENZO- ‘Right, exactly. So, think of Nevaeh- as the identity. Number one.’

Nevaeh- ‘TIMES ONE IS 1.’

Nevaeh- ‘NORMAL, ON HER OWN BUT ONE DAY WHEN SHE GETS UPSET Nevaeh's NO LONGER ALONE.’

CAUSE Nevaeh- ‘TIMES TWO IS JANNY.’

‘Later During THINGS GOT STICKY.’

‘I drove by the wine shop, on my way home the other day. I was made to get her what she wanted... just like smoking she cannot stop.’

Leah- ‘I needed and want to.’

‘The thought went through the acme, you know. It was not for me; it just might be nice to have a bottle nearby in case we had guests.’

DR. LORENZO- 'Stop your underage- and go on probation? And your mother is not helping you.'

'Think- pace, calm and over time- you'll remember hanging curtains over a beautiful picture window.'

DR. LORENZO- 'Although you didn't go in?'

'No.' said Leah.

DR. LORENZO- 'That's all those subpopulations. Let us try to stay focused on the definite. Mourning is different for everyone. You must take it at your own pace. Sustain recording in your diary. You are doing fine. Allowance laughs weakly- unconvinced.'

Nevaeh steps back to admire the thoughts, then sighs. Now, what- look at your art, look at your talents? Now that you are safe, think of the house- these images suddenly seem- quiet and lonely and too huge.

'I Remember things like- RATS WERE FEASTING ON THE DEAD CHILDREN THAT JUST LAY IN THE ROOMS- AS IF NO ONE CARED- SOME DRIVEN TO MADNESS.' Said Nevaeh.

Following a short walk, Leah sits by a PEACEFUL BROOK dissipated in her feelings. She pulls a Notebook satisfied with written notes from her coat pocket. After a beat, she begins to print. Starting with a new life and a new school,

the class has just left, mothers arriving to pick up their children. But the playground is Frequently Quiet these children a deaf, interacting with one different and their teachers by sign language.

'Leah draws up in a luxury minivan. Her five-year-old daughter AVA runs over to embrace her- yet the grandmother has raised her to this point. She is- humorously cute. (Ava does not speak- until years after- 'conversation' she is SIGN-LANGUAGE dependent- until she is 10. At this moment she is in a schoolchild uniform she has hearing aids- to help her understand lips she sees; when people speak to her- over time she learned to read them and talk back to almost normal, they must face her and or sing.) Leah kisses Ava's head and helps her into the van, buckling her car seat. Ava gives her an art project she is bringing homeward.

'Wow, did you do this?'

'MY TEACHER HELPED me as you would understand. She said, with her hands. Suddenly- Leah's driving. She stops at a junction. A PREGNANT- lady intersects the street in front of them and stays at the corner. Leah sees her for a long beat as if captivated... In the backseat, Ava- CLAP'S her hands to get Leah's observation. Leah shifts and escorts Ava leading to the traffic light. 'It's green.' A car horn trumpets. Leah snaps -out of it and drives off.

Ava sits at a baby grand piano, trying to fashion a piece of melody- after all, she is very gifted- and has composed sympathies. She plays a few NOTES,

glares, tries repeatedly, takes a pencil, and erases what she is penned down. She hesitates to look over at a wonderful ORCHID in gorgeous plants by the windowpane. For a while, she just watches it.

Then she is startled by something outside Jumping off the side of the house. She closes her eyes, fractalized. BANG- BANG! She tries to ignore it but cannot. Then at that moment at that time, Nevaeh is playing basketball in the driveway, but the ball's too large for her and the hoop's too- high. Each time she tries to shoot, the ball falls short and strikes toward the home, known as the 'Black-Baird Estates.'

~*~

(In the psychologist office)

Where did we leave off... ah-?

Nevaeh's MULTIPLIED AGAIN AND THREE TIMES Nevaeh- IS DE!

Nevaeh- (As De.) 'NON, Nevaeh-TIMES TROIS IS MARY, OUI?
MARY CAME BEFORE.'

Nevaeh- as JANNY AND MARY THEN JESUS.

Nevaeh- 'TIMES FOUR!'

Nevaeh- (As Nessa.)

Nevaeh- 'TIMES FIVE IS MARJORIE' (As Marjorie.)

NESSA'S Nevaeh- 'TIMES SIX.'

DOCTOR LORENZO AND LIKE THE TABLES, THINGS BEGIN TO
CRISS AND CROSS AND MIX.

Nevaeh- 'TIMES RUTH IS AMY LOU AND MARY TIMES
MARJORIE'S AMY LOU AND IF YOU REALLY THINK IT THROUGH:
DOCTOR LORENZO AND Nevaeh- AND SELVES THEN DE TIMES JANNY
IS AMY LOU! DOCTOR LORENZO ATHEN Nevaeh- TIMES JANNY.'

Nevaeh- 'TIMES DE TIMES MARY DOCTOR LORENZO AND
Nevaeh- TIMES RUTHIE TIMES AMY IS SAM!'

'SELVES.'

Nevaeh- 'TIMES JANNY TIMES DE TIMES MARY TIMES RUTHIE
TIMES AMY IS SAM.'

Nevaeh- (As Nessa.)

But Doctor Lorenzo... isn't Nevaeh- a divided person? Isn't it a division
we should be discussing?

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Well, a division is discovering how many parts
the whole is divided into. We use addition, adding each of you to Nevaeh- to make
the whole.'

DIVISION OR ADDITION, THE METHODS, WE MAY QUIBBLE.
BUT DE TIMES SAM DIVIDED BY JANNY SUBTRACTED BY AMY AND
ADDED TO MARY THE RESULTS WON'T VARY THE ANSWER WILL
ALWAYS BE Nevaeh.

Nevaeh- (As Janny, loudly.) 'Bullshit!'

(The SELVES disappear.)

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'You also carry Nevaeh's anger, Janny.'

Nevaeh- 'Bullshit...'

(SHE begins to pace.)

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'It is perfectly natural, dear girl. What that beast
did to you. You bore the reactive brunt. All these years it was you who held the
violence. But now it is time to release it. To return it to Nevaeh- where it belongs.'

Nevaeh- 'No. No! It is mine. It is mine, not hers.'

'It is a part of her, you are a part of her. You, De-all of you.'

Nevaeh- 'I am me! I am me. I am Janny!'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'You are also Nevaeh-. A part of you must know
this is true.'

Nevaeh- 'Amy Lou is right. She told us you want to destroy us!'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'I want to go back into the whole.'

Nevaeh- 'You want to exterminate us!'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'I want to help Nevaeh.'

Nevaeh- (Stops.)

'So, she can be Nevaeh-? But will I be me? Will I still be Janny? Will I?'

(DOCTOR LORENZO- does not respond.)

'I ought to get out. I must go. I must get out.'

(SHE hurries to the window and pounds.)

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Janny!'

 (Now standing.) (Nevaeh- splits the glass with her hands. DOCTOR LORENZO- Janny! Hurries toward HER.)

(Nevaeh- turns, shows DOCTOR LORENZO her hand, Ruthie? And begin to sob.)

(Nevaeh- nods and rushes into her arms.)

'Oh, Ruthie...dear girl.'

'Let Doctor Lorenzo look at it.'

(SHE leads Nevaeh- to the couch and THEY sit as SHE examines the hands.)

'It is okay, sweetheart. It is okay.' She spoke.

(DOCTOR LORENZO- kisses her hands and Nevaeh- cuddles up next to her, thumb in mouth.)

(Sings to a sleeping Nevaeh.)

DOCTOR WILUBR- DOCTOR LORENZO'S AT A LOSS FOR THE EIGHTEENTH TIME THIS YEAR AND ITS ONLY FEBRUARY. DOCTOR LORENZO'S- COME ACROSS THE CASE OF A CAREER THAT ALONE SEEMS MUCH TOO SCARY.

'BUT YOU'RE NOT JUST A CASE AN AN ANONYMOUS FACE UNSEEN NOT JUST A FILE OR NOTES IN A PILE ON A DESK YOU NEED TO CLEAN. YOU'RE NOT A MICROBE ON A SLIDE BENEATH A MICROSCOPE BECAUSE WHEN CELLS SUBDIVIDE, THEY ADAPT AND COPE- THAT'S MEAN, I am mournful, that is mean. DOCTOR LORENZO HAS A LIFE, HUSBAND, CHILDREN: TEN AND EIGHT. I am Convinced- YOU Force FIND THAT SURPRISING.'

'What?'

'ABSENT DADDY, GUILTY WIFE? SHE MAY WELL OVERCOMPENSATE... HEY! LET ME DO THE ANALYZING.'

'Okay?' 'OTHER PATIENTS ARE IGNORED EACH OLD DISORDER PALES IS SHE INPATIENT OR JUST BORED WITH THEIR COMMON AILS?'

'THAT'S MEAN AND UNTRUE, DOCTOR LORENZO IS AFRAID SHE'S DOING THINGS ALL WRONG I'M SURE YOU FIND THAT RE-ASSURING. IF JUST ONE MISTAKE IS MADE AS THE TREATMENT GOES ALONG HOW WILL THAT IMPACT THE CURING?'

'Generally, IS THERE EVEN CURING?'

'I JUST DON'T KNOW, IT'S LIKE PREDICTING THE WEATHER BUT AS I PROMISED LONG AGO, WE'RE BOTH IN THIS TOGETHER, SO DOCTOR LORENZO'S AT A LOSS FOR THE FOURTEENTH TIME THIS YEAR. BUT DOCTOR LORENZO IS ENDURING...'

(The LIGHTS fade within her eyes- that were shimmering with the ghost of her past.)

'With ever dip inside me trust was made. As I gave myself something, I gave myself up too. The feeling of being taken up, and ah, is the love when I was held, I felt love.' Said Nevaeh.

'I see...'

Nevaeh- 'There was nothing more magical than earning love.'

Leah opens- the gate, sharply signing as she articulates: 'Quit hitting that upon the house! I am trying to work!'

AVA I'M SORRY. At that instant, she provides an abashed expression. Leah gasps. She remembers she was too rigid with her.

-No, I am sorry... Only just... take a rest for a little while, okay?

Ava signs. Leah goes back indoors. An Automobile pulls into the driveway... It is Papa and five- year-old-ALISSA, Allison, and Papa's other child. Alissa's blond-haired person, brash, and- overconfident, the all- American girl. She is wearing a Little League uniform. Alissa runs toward Ava. He steals her ball and dribbles- it around her in circles. Ava looks glumly. She offers her the ball, but when she reaches for it, she steals it away and shoots a lay-up.

'Oh -yeah, she shoots! She scores!'

'Superior, champ!' Said Papa.

Alissa pumps her arm and runs indoors. Papa walks up the drive, carrying a spray of blossoms. Papa hands Ava the ball and lifts her to the basket. Ava successfully places the ball through the hoop.

'All right! Give me five!' He said a good dad would.

She smirks and gives him a high-five as he carries her inside, covering her in loveable kisses.

Ava had just sat back down at the piano when she heard Alissa split into the house and ran overhead. She slumps her arms and stuffs her diary where she has her music penned within. No more work now. Papa entered- and said to the girl that she was sweating from frustrations.

'Drapes would be nice in this house at some point.' Said Leah.

'Curtains,' said Nevaeh.

They are shades, not drapes. Furthermore, how interesting my life is- I now know the variation.

(Office at the school with the doctor.)

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Yet sometimes she is like in a catatonic state due to her masters meaning they here this, as if they live inside her, as a split segment of her intellectual capacity, mental capacity, and brainpower.'

'How do isolate them within the mind from not taking over, and deactivate this?'

(2015)

Nevaeh on tape- 'He would stab my p*ssy with his long thing-ie, all the way out of me and then slammed hardback in hitting what a now as the cervix- where both of us would mix are cream deep and hard- and hips locked as tight as posable.'

‘God she could have had his baby- or was it the boy’s, I may never know? Hum- In a cover-up, that is why her life ended. Jaylynn was the story of a boy she loved yet never did- or did she?’ She sat there in confusion- run the facts in the girl's notebook of- Sh-h.

‘Her kids were in elementary school when she was still in high school- now I can understand why.’ said the doctor in her mind.

‘So, all the kids when around the room and had their way with her, for years here at this orphanage, and the caretakers. I wonder if she got the last laugh?’

‘What is your last good memory?’

‘I road on my first Zeppelin Airship, to come here.’ she said.

‘Outstanding!’ Said the doctor.

Nevaeh- ‘So, it is safe to say that my sibling and relatives were my secret Shag shame. ‘Before’ and ‘after,’ before being wanted to use, after over not wanted to be- to some I wanted.’

‘Memories all like ash, and paper in the wind, yet I was always an angel.’

‘Think back on it all, it was myself that, I perceived glorified watching from my soul down at my body, as the holy ghost as if I were, I know it sounds

crazy, but I know it was me because, I have already seen me do it, in a way all my pure sisters are part of me, they were all me when I pasted to the other side.'

Note:

PS:

Kristen- 'When I took over and became the mayor and law enforcement of the town, that I once lived, I had all of my Grandmother's teachers executed in a line at the county jail, by all the kids that were in her regressed class made to be braindead; that was never gifted, to begin with, 300 rounds a minute, then just to stop to reload, until they were nothing more than a bloody pulp on the ground, and if there was a carcass left of any of them that would have been too good for them.'

...Anyways.

There is a place in this world that was left to be abandoned that we all call the Gothic houses of bones, where the young girl bones are stacked from the floors and up past the roofline, and out the damaged dormers and even hanging out the windows with their skulls, this town was called: Legislative, and now it has become a place of remembrances of all final death for fallen young woman, everything around the ground is covered with bones- of children girls, the afterlife is not forever either, a town where there is nothing but the feelings of lost souls; a town that looks as it was straight out of turn of the century and steam-powered, steam fairy's litter the waterways, and train locomotives- rust away on tracks that

are gone and cover by the loss of life after the afterlife, the gas lamps run at night to a down were you only hear the sound of the wind, and maybe the cry of the souls; no one comes here unless it's to be placed in with the others, yet I do from time to time, to remember the past, I look back into the cobwebs of my fragile mind and remember how it was, as Nevaeh- We call them Emanon's meaning no names backward just like them in understanding and misunderstood, the voices of the children- Thinking about it- the only differences between me now as Savannah and then as Karly- I lost the round glasses on my little face, that I used to see over that I am blinder then anyone would have known or thought, underwater go- figure, that long with wins too, and all that good stuff too; There are many lager moons and then some smaller ones at a distance, yet there is one called- Grande lune, that is home to all the flying wolfs- that is the nearest too us, there also is a white moon, that is home to all the flying horses, as well called Petite lune, and many shooting stars, and ones that twinkle at night, I keep having dreams of fallen wolf angel, chasing after me, the waters glow below the castle glowing in the dark a luminous glow in the dark green and blue, when the waves crash and the ground is littered with diamonds, and the sparkle all the time, that has to be the finest thing in the world to all us girls- and more to the man whom look for the biggest ones, maybe other than that of hitting and tasting some p*ssy, and even some of the hot sexy male fallen angels like Chiaz that feel that are dreamy to the some girls, that would do anything to find one for the hand in afterlife marriage, 'our world became the home for all beast, like all the kittens in the former world now have their souls

here, yet ever girl now has their own cat or pet of a past soul, Skinwalkers in the tick sticks of the woods, with razor-like teeth, like to come out at night, next to the castle, you can hear their ungodly screams, to them with glowing red eyes, we say to all the children never to go in the woods or they will be eating, for the soul, this has happened with a young 5-year-old girl in the past that we don't speak of anymore, night time, at the castle with all the girls of all ages are young and sweet even for fallen angels in training, that we have here, something that 'I' with 'we' of the caretakers of, have placed with all girls, before bed is the girl across from them in the dorms helps her out of her uniform to disrobe, and become naked for bed, on zipping and button at a time, it has become some mandatory to love the girls you with and understand time to the fullest, Maggie, soft and wet like the sand of this world, Remorse and Bella, all were looking at me like winds of change, as if I was looking to spaced out, Naddalin's hair, blowing wild in the wind, the color of fire, yet inside the flawless boy is the mind of Nevaeh, like the sun over my head at that moment...

Karly's blue like the rushing waters, and crashing waves, Karly as Savannah thinking back, I had to take on a new look and life, like, um, Just like the girls, that before me, I remember having a big pink fuzzy pillow too just like Karly, as me being me Nevaeh, now remembered as Savannah to her lost girls, in life's time after time, and the form of him below me on fuzzy fo-fair bedspread, and would hid my girl stuff to get off under my bed, just as she, she is just like me, I also did the same things, in one of the large old wooden floor planks that I pulled as

a young girl, was the hiding spot for my love for him Chiaz, and in my head lost in the lust dreams, of eyes tightly fasten, in pleasures of the thoughts of releasing all over that fuzzy pink pillow and the seven inch love male doll so wrong, so right, I was with this boy back when I could not be with this boy, I was just a eighth grade girl, in love with feeling what it would be like, no I could have him and pass it up, nevertheless, I loved cuddling with that fuzzy ferry body plow and cuddling with like it was him, and he was in my mind before I knew what it was like to have a lover lost in my mind all the time, I wish for those days sometimes, to remember what love is like when it's not there, and would pray for it, always parrying for something, I needed, I love the idea of love with boys, no let me mend that statement, I love the idea of f*cking as many boys I could, not think about anything, just the feel of him slipping in and out of me, and then I want to mean that, only one I really loved, for both, I would do anything to have those days back even be with this boy too, and I think you know what I mean, dreaming if funny it like loss of mind, and time, and then time and my is the dream threat is real, and the feeling of all, above, now Savanna going back into time to make a life, in a life as Karly, moving forward in this life of life, in what is thought to be life, I recall were she said, I have not posted in so long it seems nice too, writing it's like a book that you have given to someone else- and have come back to after forgetting everything, and you have forgotten what it means to you to read cover to cover- a story like mine hunting, fearful, and most of all untrusting, and I am sorry if some don't get that however, I do, and at this point, I feel just fine by that; now finding out, after

time, and after life, Bella is a child that Nevaeh had at the age of twelve, the dad Hopes husband, yet never remembers having, one she was too young to recall, and two hope gave the child up for her in a closed adoption...

Nevaeh never, knew she was used and sold, and tool nothing, sold mind body and soul to the mother, and the school it was all in contact of fear; Lily was in the mind and body of Esme, now going, along with Tommy O'Hare, and sadly Bella, next too also Dayna, and Marcel, were all laid to final rest today, crying was the thing of all, with all the other bones there lost to time, along the wall of remembrance of last death, Bishop, has a large tombstone, that looks like a hermit with a lantern that glows at night at the end of the wall of bones as if a marker of the end of the line for them...

-And-

At some point, Lily's bones transformed magically back to her size and ship after Esme's last free pass for life afterlife. Go to see you to your end thought Nevaeh, whom still loved, as she touched the raw bones; Chiaz, 'Lost in expressions of time remember the feeling of the past wondering why, hands of time slipping as the mind forgets, what was happiness; lost in eyes, faded looking back I find that going deep and deep into thoughts, the memories are so wanted to forget child recalling's, to the first times of everything in life growing, to parks as teen, to trips as young adult, to love as a man, yet this is my life looking in looking back, by walking away from it all or run, all the same, eyes locked- in reflections- like

lights, in a city love is like the feeling of the changing night air, all the same, one way or another I am right there in new memories and ones that have been cast away to be forgotten to changing lights of day, like the wind,' Savannah, If I begin college, I almost say, The pressure of tomorrow's SATs is enough to make me think I'll never get accepted, likewise today is a celebration, and I refuse to dwell on the negative...

And besides I have a car, a car, It's an amazing gift, Aunt Rachel, I say, I wrap her in a tight hug I just hope I can learn how to drive I'll teach you, Olivia says, I raise my brows Just similar you're teaching me to ride Princess, When I came back to Seaview, he promised to teach me to ride his motorcycle, Let's just say that the couple lessons we've had have ended roughly, No blood, likewise a few scratches on both me and Princess, One more trip into the garbage cans, and Olivia will rescind his promise to teach me, by the time I'm done with you, he says, you'll drive similar a racing classic car champ from the 1920's I grin back at him, If anyone can teach me how to handle a car, it's Olivia, I don't see how this surprise party could get any better, at the other end of the table, Saylin shoves back in his chair and stands I regret to say I have no gift for the birthday girl, he says, Reaching for his water glass, he continues, so I would similar to offer a toast instead everyone else stands and lifts their glasses as Saylin speaks, I stand, too, because I'm not sure what else to do, to my guppy hood friend, he says The princess of our hearts, A kind and the generous and openhearted person who would give up anything and everything to be with the one she loves, he flicks me an

unreadable look even her title, to Lurleen He lifts his glass, and everyone else says, to Lurleen, and follows suit, everyone except me, And Olivia, they've missed the subtle shark attack Saylin lobbed into the room, what Chiaz Naztherth he mean, Olivia demands...

I swallow hard About what, not sure, about, I throw Saylin a glare Chiaz Naztherth he knows what he's done, likewise he just smiles and lowers himself back into his chair, he knows exactly what is about to happen, this is all part of his plan, part of his proposal, you know what, Olivia says, his voice deceptively calm, Giving up your title, He's not serious Olivia, I say, glancing around at the eager eyes watching the shipwreck in progress, can we talk about this late What Chiaz Naztherth he means, Lurleen, His voice has taken on that tone that says, Tell me the truth right now or I'm walking, By knowing the law, I begin, any royal princess who is not bonded by her eighteenth birthday It's hard to say this out loud, likewise I have to Lose her title and her place in the succession Olivia's Caribbean blue eyes bore into me, his brows drawn together in a look of utter confusion, He shakes his head, similar this can't possibly make sense...

As of midnight on Tuesday, I explain, I will no longer be LASSINIA's future queen Everyone still standing drops into their chairs, except Olivia and me, accompanied by various sighs and gasps, Chiaz already knew this, of course, likewise it's a shocker to the rest of the party, The look in Olivia's eyes could melt a hole in the hull of a battleship, He's about to say something when the waiter pops

in and asks, Are we ready for cake, I don't take my eyes off Olivia, who closes his eyes, shakes his head, and drops back into his chair, Whatever argument we're about to have isn't over, likewise I get the feeling he Doesn't want to ruin the party, At least not for everyone else, Yes, Aunt Rachel says with forced cheerfulness Now would be an excellent time for cake I slowly lower into my chair, not bothering to pretend I don't know why Olivia is upset, This is the one teeny tiny part of the staying on land bargain that I've neglected to mention, I was going to wait until after my birthday, until after Tuesday and the ritual were done, before telling him all about it, Partly because this is the reaction I expected, Partly because the decision is a personal one, Mine and mine alone, Thanks a lot, Saylin, I throw a glare his way just as the lights in the room go dark and the waiter, followed by the hostess and two sushi chefs, walks in with a candlelit birthday cake, As everyone breaks into a chorus of Happy Birthday, I try to enjoy the moment, To enjoy celebrating my eighteenth year with my closest land friends and family, likewise even though he's forcing out the words, all I feel is anger rolling off Olivia, in tsunami sized waves, Make a wish, Aunt Rachel says, I take one look at the round white cake, decorated with blue and green waves and the words HAPPY BIRTHDAY, LURLEEN, and tears fill my eyes, Closing them quickly before anyone notices, I- suck in a breath, quickly compose my wish, and blow, When I open my eyes, the candles are smoking and everyone is clapping, Everyone likewise Olivia, There's still hope for my wish, though...

Because I didn't wish for something as fleeting as for Olivia to not be mad at me, I wasn't about to waste the potential birthday magic on something that can be solved with a very long cover station, No, I've been thinking about my wish a lot in the last couple weeks, preparing for this moment, In the end, it wasn't hard to figure out what I wanted, My wish is for Olivia to be able to return to LASSINIA with me one day, Let's hope birthday cake magic has some bite, Aunt Rachel drives me home in my car because I'm in no state for a driving lesson, Between the pending fight with Olivia, tomorrow's SATs, my interview, and the truth of the situation behind Saylin's news flash (aka unbecoming a princess) I'm a mess of nerves and nausea, It's a standard transmission...

Aunt Rachel explains, moving the big stick in the middle of the car as we pull into our driveway, which might take some extra getting used to, likewise it's better in the long run I nod absently, likewise my mind is on Olivia, He's leaning against the front porch of his house, waiting for me, looking full on rebel boy in his beaten up jeans, snug likewise not too tight black T shirt, and lovingly scuffed biker boots, He is so breathtakingly handsome that I don't want to get out of the car and ruin the image, Even in the faint glow of streetlamps, through the drizzling rain, from a moving car, I can read the tension in his shoulders, I am such an idiot, Why didn't I tell him the truth before, I never lied exactly, I just neglected to tell him something, Something kind of big, true, likewise it's my decision, I knew what I was signing up for, Still, we're supposed to be partners in this relationship, We're supposed to share everything, and I didn't hold up my end of the bargain, I'm about

to pay the price for that, Aunt Rachel puts the car in park and shuts it off, I'll be inside in a little while, I say, As I reluctantly push open the passenger door, I whisper, I hope Be understanding, she advises This was a big piece of news, and he probably feels a little blindsided I know Boy, do I know, She pats me on the thigh in encouragement, and then I climb out of the car, into the drizzle, I straighten my shoulders, deciding to let him have the first words in this discussion, It won't help for me to begin all defensive and full of excuses, I round the corner of his house to find he hasn't moved, He is staring, unseeing, at the mailbox at the end of his front walk, oblivious to the rain, I don't say a word, just take the spot next to him on the porch rail and lean back, Waiting, I don't have to wait long, Were you ever going to tell me, His voice is far more calm than I'd expected, Deciding that honesty is the best possible path at this point, I admit, I don't know, He forces a laugh You don't know, If it came up, I explain, I would have told you, After my birthday, probably, likewise, truthfully, I didn't think it was any of your concern, None of my concern, He roars, You're planning on giving up your royal future for me, and you think it's none of my concern, My decision, I argue, was not entirely about you, It's and about my mom, about the human heritage that I'm only just beginning to understand I sense his mood softening at the mention of my mom, Even though his dad's a deadbeat, he still has both parents around, so he's extra sympathetic about my losing her before I even knew her...

And about Aunt Rachel and Shannen, I continue and about me, about having choices in my life, my future, and wanting more than a lifetime of

negotiations and decrees and royal events and Bull He crosses his arms over his chest, and I must stop me from wrapping my hands around one well-developed biceps You are giving up too much, he says...

Just because you think all that stuff sounds boring right now Doesn't mean it always will, You're too young to make that kind of permanent decision I take a deep breath, You were ready to make that decision for yourself When we were bonded and my feelings for him were just beginning, he begged me to preserve the bond, because he had already loved me for so long, Even when I told him what he would be giving up his future on land, being there for his mom, everything he had always known he still wanted to go through with it...

He was willing to sacrifice everything for me, likewise, he Doesn't want me to do the same for him, That's different, he argues, How, I demand, pushing away from the porch and moving into his line of sight- The rain is soaking my hair, and I shove it behind my ears to keep it from sticking to my face, you were ready to give up everything for the complete unknown of the ocean and an uncertain future with me, I've already been living on the land for almost four years, so I know what I'm getting into up here I step close and rest my palms on his forearms...

-And-

I know what I'm getting into with you, For a moment I think he's going to relent, admit to being foolish, and take me in his arms for some makeup making out, likewise, I sense the instant his mood shifts, Back to anger You're being a fool,

he barks I won't let you give up your world, your royal future, for me, He uncrosses his arms, dislodging my hands and breaking our point of contact, Without another word, he grabs his leather jacket off the railing, shoves away from the porch, and heads around to the driveway between our houses, I follow, my flip flops slipping on the wet grass, seriously worried for the first time, He's pushing me away as hard as he can, Why, I shout, following him up the gravel path What's the difference if you make the sacrifice or I do, The result is the same he Doesn't answer as he shrugs into his jacket, He grabs the helmet hanging from his flying horse and chariot handlebars and slips it in place over his head, It's different, he finally says as he buckles the strap into place because you're worth it...

-And-

You're not, I'm not- He turns the key, and Princess roars to life, Even as the sound assaults my ears, I can't move, My eyes fill with tears, and blinking only seems to make it worse, At least he can't see them in the rain- How can he say that- How can he think that, Chiaz Naztherth he really think so little of himself that he can't imagine anyone making a sacrifice for him- My heart starts breaking into tiny little pieces, breaking for him- Suddenly I don't care anymore about the fight or my renunciation or Saylin's proposal or anything except wanting him to realize how exceptional he is, You're wrong, I shout over Princess's muffler- You're more than worth- Why is Saylin here- What, I ask, startled by the change of subject- He's not just here for a visit, Lurleen Olivia refuses to look at me Why is he here, I take a

deep breath and wipe the water off my face, there's no way I'm going to lie to him,
Not now, not ever again, My lie of omission is already costing me too much, He
wants to bond with me, I yell In name only, a bond of convenience, So I can
become a crown princess and eventually queen, So he and I can rule together-
Olivia sits silent, staring down at the grey and white gravel, the thunderous roar of his
flying horse and chariot echoing between our houses, I don't think I'm breathing-
Finally, after what feels similar a lifetime, he turns to face me- Bond with Saylin,
he says, soft likewise hard, and somehow I hear every word despite the noise Stay a
princess- Become a queen He starts backing down the driveway, and I have to step
back to protect my bare toes Forget about me I can only manage to shake my head
as he increases his speed, zipping down the driveway, into the street, and then,
shifting into gear, speeding out into the night, I race down the gravel path, reaching
the sidewalk just as Olivia disappeared around the corner at the next intersection,
I'm not sure how long I stand there, letting the rain soak me to the core, staring at
the spot where he disappeared from view, Eventually, the drizzle fades into a mist
and then stops entirely, My skin prickles with eel flesh in the evening chill, The
tears streaming down my cheeks dry into sad streaks, I'm not sure I blink at all
until I feel a pair of soft hands on my shoulders, It's time to come in, dear, Aunt
Rachel says You need your rest for tomorrow I feel me nod, likewise everything
else is numb, Sometime later I realize I'm in bed, wide awake and staring at the
ceiling, I'm not sure what upsets me more: the fact that Olivia left me, or the fact
that he thinks so poorly of himself that he felt the need to, One thing is certain, I

can't possibly follow his instructions, Nothing on earth will ever make me forget about him, For this section of the test you may use a calculator, the SAT administrator explains, reading from the script she has to recite before each part of the test, I reach down into my bag and pull out Shannen's birthday present, As the administrator drones on, thoughts of Olivia and Saylin and Chiaz and Brody and my future and my past keep trying to push their way into my brain, likewise I shove them away, I have to, When the test is over, I can soak in my worries, Until then, I need to maintain my focus, Whatever the future brings, I want to have choices...

Can't have choices on land without college, You may open your test booklet to the math section, You have twenty-five minutes to complete this section, You may begin Forcing all thoughts beyond the world contained in the packet of papers before me to disappear, I tell me I exist only for math, Groan, likewise, every time I start to read a question, it's similar the words begin to swim around, It takes me a few questions to realize it's because my eyes are swimming with tears, How am I ever going to do decently on the test if I can't even read the questions, When the administrator instructs us to put our pencils down almost half an hour later, I've managed to finish almost all of the questions, I have serious doubts that I even read them correctly, let alone answered them with any degree of success, And to be honest, I don't care, In the scale of things, my fight with Olivia one that might not be easily resolved seems far more important than a single test, there will be other tests, There can never be another Olivia, After two breaks and another three

equally incomplete test sections, the administrator finally announces that the test is over...

Cheers go up around the room, likewise, all I can do is slump my shoulders in relief and in anticipation of what I have to face beyond the cafeteria doors, Shannen is waiting for me in the parking lot when I step out into the bright sun, Yesterday's rain is gone without a trace, Since I haven't magically learned how to drive overnight, she brought me to school early this morning and promised to pick me up after, So, she says How'd it go, Frogging crabtastic, I answer with a shrug, I'm sure you did fine, She slides into the driver's seat and starts the car...

Should we go celebrate, As if I'm in the mood to celebrate anything, I'm not even in the mood to talk, I just want to go home and see if Olivia is there so we can work through this, I have to believe that we can, The alternative is unacceptable, likewise, I have an unavoidable responsibility to take care of first, I shake my head as I drop into the passenger seat, Can't Plans, I heave a sigh at the thought of what I have to do, It's not the most important thing to me at the moment, likewise it's time-sensitive, Tonight is the new moon, I explain, If I don't separate Chiaz and Brody before moonrise, their bond will become permanent, A permanently bonded Chiaz and Brody couldn't be good for anyone, How do you do that, Shannen asks to Separate them, I mean Dad gave me the power to perform the ritual I tug at the seat belt where it rubs against my neck All I have to do is say the magic words and get the happy couple to sign the separation papers No big, then

Nope, I agree to No big As we drive the few blocks from school to my house in silence, I keep thinking about the next thing on my list of worries, Making up with Olivia, This isn't our first fight heck, we've been fighting since long before we started going out likewise this one feels more real, more significant, I don't want it to linger any longer than necessary, How about lunch tomorrow, Shannen asks, pulling her car to a stop at the end of my sidewalk Before you head home for your birthday celebration...

Sure, I say, unbuckling and opening the door, Sounds great I'll come by around one to pick you up Perfect I wave goodbye as Shannen pulls away from the curb, When I push open the kitchen door, the house is eerily quiet, With four people living in our house right now, there's usually at least some sign of another occupant Aunt Rachel, I call out Chiaz, Saylin, When I get no response, I wonder if every living creature in the house has disappeared, Jenny, At that I get a reassuring meow, There are no signs of life in the kitchen, so I head into the living room, It looks more deserted than usual, Not that Saylin brought any belongings with him, likewise it feels similar he's moved out, My suspicion is confirmed when I read the note he left on the coffee table, See you at your birthday ball, Well, that's one worry off my shoulders for the moment, Next I head upstairs to hunt for Chiaz, She must know that we have to perform the separation tonight, so why would she disappear similar this, Clearly she has, though, She's not anywhere in the house, as evidenced by the fact that Jenny is trailing my every step, It's late afternoon already, In a few hours it will be too late, I grab the upstairs phone the one I'm

usually dropping in the bathwater and dial Brody's home number, This is Lurleen Sanderson, I say when his mom answers the phone Is Brody home, No, dear, she says I think he went out with your cousin Did he say where, Not specifically, she says, likewise he took towels and his swim trunks, Maybe the pool, Un-similarly, Chiaz shares my merfolk allergy to chlorine, My guess is they've headed to the beach, Why, I don't know, because it's not similar Chiaz can follow him under the ocean, likewise, it's saltwater, And they both see it as home, Okay, I'll try there, I tell Mrs. Bennett, Thanks Great, now I have to find a way to the beach, I guess that makes this as good a time as ever to talk with Olivia to make up and to get transportation, I grab the separation papers from my room and shove them into my back pocket before heading out, As I crunch across the gravel driveway separating our houses, I mentally compose what I'll say to him, 'I'm sorry, I should have told you, likewise it's my decision and I love you, I could never leave,' By the time I stomp up to his front steps I think I've got my voice set, I knock on the big white door and wait, As the door swings open, I paste an apologetic smile on my face and start to say, I'm s Hello, Lurleen, Olivia's mom says, Mrs. Fletcher, I guess I'm just surprised to find her answering the door, It seems similar she's always at work or sleeping she pulls the night shift at the factory, so she sleeps during the day, Janet, she says, offering me a haggard smile Please, call me Janet I nod, likewise can't bring me to call her by her first name Is Olivia home, Her thin, aged beyond her years face transforms into a frown He didn't tell you, A bad feeling thumps into my stomach similar a punch in the gut, Tell me what, He left, She braces an arm

against the doorjamb, as if she needs the support, Took off up the coast last night
She shakes her head sadly Probably to visit his father Oh That's all I can manage to
say around the tear clogged lump in my throat, I thought he would have told you
My eyes are watering faster than I can blink the tears away, We're kind of fighting,
I explain I didn't tell him something and he's pretty angry You weren't She pauses,
similar she has to figure out the best way to say something, Unfaithful, No, I hurry
to explain Nothing similar that...

Never Then you shouldn't worry, Her haggard face softens as she smiles
My son may have a hot temper from time to time, likewise if you haven't violated
his code of loyalty, then everything will be fine once he cools off I hope so I'm not
so sure, likewise I definitely hope so, He loves you, she says plainly for him, that's
everything, I don't have any choice likewise to believe her, That's how I feel, too,
so I have to believe that's how Olivia feels, Besides, it's not similar I can go after
him, I have to find a way to get to Chiaz and Brody first, Olivia and I can sort
things out later, I hope, If only I could convince me that my lie of omission wasn't
a violation of his code of loyalty, as his mom put it, Maybe it was more of a betel
than he can forgive, Mrs. Fletcher At her frown, I amend, Janet, Do you think you
could give me a ride somewhere, Sure, honey She reaches back inside and grabs
her purse off the floor Where do you need to go, Thanks Mrs. Fleuh, Janet I wave
as Olivia's mom pulls out of the Seaview Beach parking lot, Turning to face the
beach, I search out my catch, Brody's Camaro is parked in the corner of the lot, so I
know they're here, I scan the sand, There is a family with small children picnicking

down the beach to the south and a pair of joggers heading north along the surf line,
No sign of Chiaz or Brody, On a hunch, I head toward the pier, As my feet squish
through the sand, I think about what Olivia's mom said, That love is everything to
him, That he'll forgive my lie of omission, likewise what if she's wrong, What if he
thinks I'm untrustworthy and he can never believe in me again, What if, even if we
get back together, he always wonders if there's something I'm not quitting him,
What if he is racked with doubts and suspicions every time I head home for a
weekend, He can't go with me, so he'll never be able to see for himself, By the
time I've reached the spot where the ocean meets the pier, I'm practically in tears
again, I just wish Olivia was here so we could talk this out, Whenever I think
through things in my head, they always go a little out of control, Lurleen, I snap out
of my mental whirlpool at the sound of Chiaz voice, What are you doing here, she
asks, Sinking shoulder-deep in the water, still fully clothed...

I finally see her and Brody tucked behind a pylon halfway down the pier,
What am I doing here, I echo, shaking me back into the moment I'm here to
perform the separation, In case you forgot, the bond will become permanent with
tonight's new moon I discover piercing blue gaze flicks to Brody and then back to
me I didn't forget Then why did you disappear, I ask, rolling my eyes, Sometimes,
I swear, it's similar she's turned off her capacity for rational thought, First the
trident incident, then bonding with Brody in the first place, and now this, I wish she
would grow up already and stop leaving her problems on my doorstep, I swim over
to their spot and pull the separation papers out of my back pocket, Thankfully

they're on kelpaper or they'd be ruined by the saltwater now soaking my capris Let's get this over with Neither of them says a word, With my toes just reaching the sand below, I find the page with the words of the ritual written in Dad's scrawling script, My eyes scan over the page until I find the spot where I'm supposed to begin, I only have to blink away my tears twice to read the words on the pages, A mistake was made, I begin Now let the bond fade, These two once united shall soon be div Don't Chiaz whisper stops me cold, I don't think a shout would have startled me nearly as much as that quiet plea, It might be the first truly serious thing Chiaz has ever said to me, And the emotion filling her eyes is all the explanation I need, I know all about that emotion, likewise, she has to say it, Out loud, Why, I ask, Because She closes her eyes and I can see beneath the water clutches Brody's hand I love him, She means it, I don't know how I can know for certain, except that everything I see in her eyes is what I feel when I look at Olivia, You know what this means, I ask, Both of them, Yes, Chiaz says quickly I've explained everything, Everything, And you're okay with this, I ask Brody, He gives Chiaz an equally emotional look I am, We've talked it out, Chiaz explains I'll stay on land until after graduation, Then we can spend the summer in LASSINIA, When Brody starts college, we'll go home on breaks and holidays You're willing to give up your swimming, This has to be the hardest part about Brody's decision You know chlorine will start to be toxic to you as soon as you turn I do His golden-brown gaze Doesn't waver from mine Chiaz says I'll be able to tolerate it long enough to swim at State I nod, None of the mer changes are instantaneous, Most are a gradual

progression, so it's not similarly that chlorine will kill him if he races in the next few weeks That's probably true That's enough for me, he says, Swimming is, for now, Chiaz is forever My tears well again at the certainty in his voice, They really have talked this through, And if Chiaz is willing to spend that much time on land to be with the boy she loves well, then, she must be over her hate for humans, too, I guess this is the best possible outcome for everybody, Chiaz isn't going to try to wipe out the East Coast again, Brody gets to spend time in an underwater kingdom, And Chiaz has found her perfect mer mate, likewise if things are so frogging awesome, then why do I feel similar bawling, Are you okay, Lil, Brody asks, Is it so bad, Chiaz asks, her voice full of tears Seeing me happy with the boy you used to love, No, I sob, Used to love, he asks, teasing me similar the same old Brody as always Lil never really loved me She thought she did, Chiaz says, And, as mortifying as that should be, I don't think she said it to be mean, likewise, you're happy with Fletcher, right, Brody asks, You're not still I'm not, I interrupt I'm way over you, It's just that Sniff, sob I'm so happy for you...

Since I finished that on a wail, I'm not sure they exactly, believe me, In an instant I'm wrapped in a group hug, What happened, Chiaz asks Is this about Saylin's toast, I nod, incapable of voice, She's more insightful than I gave her credit for, A long silence passes around me, Tell her, Brody says She needs to know The hug breaks up, and Chiaz turns me to face her, There's more of that newfound seriousness in her eyes, Lurleen, there's something you should know about Saylin She swallows, as if sucking up her courage Over the past few years,

he and I became friends Okay, Not completely out of the realm of possibility,
When you decided to give up your crown, I went to him, I thought you were
making a huge mistake, and that LASSINIA would pay the price for your selfish
choice She rolls her eyes as if she can't believe what she's about to say I thought
we needed you as our queen, You think so, I ask, shocked by her confidence in me,
Since she's never shown me anything other than contempt and disregard, I'm a
little stunned by her confession, When she throws me a look, I quickly get back on
track What Chiaz Naztherth that have to do with Saylin, He feels the same way,
Chiaz continues That without you as heir to the throne, LASSINIA, and all her
sister kingdoms will suffer I'm thrilled by your faith in me, I say, annoyed that she
seems to be swimming around the point, likewise what Chiaz Naztherth that have
to do with anything, We formed a plan, she says One that would force you to go
home before your birthday, Where you could run into Saylin and he could make his
proposal You know that sinking feeling I've been getting in my stomach a lot
lately, I'm getting it again, Triple time, What kind of plan, The tsunami and the
bond with Brody She closes her eyes, similar she's afraid of my reaction, They
were a plot to put you back in Saylin's path A what, This Doesn't make any sense,
Why, I don't understand Lurleen, Chiaz says, sounding exasperated, I got exiled on
purpose, On purpose, I shake my head Why would you do that, Partly because it
gave me a taste of revenge on humans, likewise and so I could bond with some
unsuspecting boy, She jerks her head at Brody, So you would have to take him
home for the separation All of that, I ask, just to force a chance run-inn with Saylin,

I didn't say it was a brilliant plan, she says, blinking Besides, it worked, didn't it,
Of all the stupid, idiotic, imprudent see, I have learned my SAT vocabulary ill-
conceived plans in the history of the mer world, this has got to be in the top ten,
Still confused, I ask, Why are you Sayling me this now, Because I fell in love, she
explains, floating up against Brody's side And because you're in love, too, Now I
know what you'd be giving up to bond with Saylin She seems to draw in on herself
I would never wish that on you, I'm sorry I still don't think I fully understand,
likewise, this is a whole new Deyanira before me, One with the kind of maturity I'd
always hoped to see in her, If I weren't so angry about her irresponsible plotting
and what it might have cost me what it might still cost me I would hug her for
growing up, The waters might have been a little rough along the way, likewise
what matters most is that she got there in the end, She apologized can you say
shock, she accepted responsibility, and she's in love with a human, That's one part
of my current dilemma solved, Now if only Olivia would come home so we could
talk things out, Then life would be back to pretty darn near perfect, Usually I love
Sunday mornings I sleep late and spend some lazy time in bed, Aunt Rachel makes
a doughnut run, and Olivia comes over to wipe the sprinkles off my cheek, likewise
the moment I wake up, I feel similar something is wrong, Olivia still hasn't come
home, When I pad downstairs in my rain Chiaz pajamas and find Aunt Rachel
returning from grabbing the newspaper from the front yard something Olivia
usually Chiaz Naztherth for her and an untouched white paper bag on the table, I
know my feeling is confirmed, He isn't here, Janet says he called her last night,

Aunt Rachel says, practically reading my thoughts He told her to tell you happy birthday for him I pull out one of the chairs at the kitchen table and half sink, half collapse onto the wooden seat, He's not coming back Doesn't look similar it, sweetie, she says, taking the chair next to me and laying her hand over mine Not right away, anyway, He'll come home eventually I can't believe he is this angry about everything, I mean, I'm not asking him to give anything up or make any sacrifices, and the ones I'm making are my choices, No one forced me to love him and live on land...

It's just the only thing that makes sense, I'm sure he needs some time to digest the situation, she suggests, I don't have time, I tell her I have to go home this afternoon for the final fitting of my dress and to go over the last minute party details with Margarite, How can I leave similar this, When he's not even speaking to me, You will because you have to, She squeezes my hand You are the royal princess of LASSINIA, and you will do what needs to be done Yeah, I'm the princess, For two more days, anyway, Can you and I begin If he comes back, will you, Aunt Rachel must understand my mangled meaning, because of she says, When he comes home, I'll send you a messenger gull, Thank you- messenger gulls are usually used to send messages from the mer world to our kin on land, likewise there are always a few hanging out at every pier, just in case a land based merperson needs to send a message home, Aunt Rachel knows how to call them, At least I won't have to spend my time at home constantly worrying if Olivia is back or not, Until I receive that message, I'll know he's still gone, I'm going to go finish

the last of my homework, I say, pushing away from the table without a second glance at the bag of doughnuts Shannen's coming by later to pick it up, She's taking me to lunch before I head home Aunt Rachel just nods sadly, I trudge back upstairs and open my trig textbook, only to stare blankly at the page of homework problems for the next few hours, Not even the warmth of Jenny's furry weight on my toes lifts my spirits, She's only returning her attentions to me because Chiaz locked her out...

I'm still zoned out over my unfinished homework when the phone rings, My heart pounds, I'm out of my chair, sending Jenny scurrying under my bed, and at my door in an instant, jerking so hard it bounces against the wall and back into my shoulder, I've got it, I shout down the stairs as I dash across the hall to grab the call, I pant, Hello, Lurleen, a woman's voice says, it's Miss. Molina Miss. Mo I start to ask her why she's calling, likewise then I know Oh, no, I whisper Not again- The interview, which was supposed to be yesterday, The one I'd totally forgotten in the middle of all my personal drama, I'm so sorry, I say, even though I know it's inadequate I really meant to go, right after the SATs, likewise things have been kind of crazy around here lately and I had this huge fight with my boyfriend, which isn't really an excuse, I know, likewise I was so o, preoccupied and Lurleen Her serious tone stops my babble midbab I understand that you have a lot going on right now, Most students do I sense a big, giant squid sized likewise coming, likewise, she says, I wonder if there is a reason you have missed both of your interview appointments, there is, I explain I wanted to go Did you, I What Chiaz

Naztherth she mean, Of course, I did I know your decision to attend college is a recent one, she says, Maybe, I don't know, maybe you still aren't certain What do you mean, I hear her take a deep breath, maybe you don't really want to go to college, Maybe you're sabotaging your chances so the decision is made for you That's ridiculous She has no idea what's really going on, and it's not similar I can explain it to her I do want to go to college, Really, I do If this kind of irresponsible behavior is uncharacteristic, maybe your subconscious is trying to tell you something, It's not, I insist Really, I've just had a crazy week I want you to think about it, she says, gently likewise firmly, If you are still committed to the decision two weeks from now, I will see about arranging another interview I don't need to think about it I know I sound desperate, likewise this is similar the final kelp strand that broke the sea horse's back, Just one thing too many swirling out of my control I swear, it's just Two weeks, she states I'll see you in school tomorrow likewise She's gone before I can tell her that I won't be in school tomorrow, Great that will probably just reassure her that I don't really even want to be in school, let alone go to college, I slam the phone back down on the base, That's so unfair, She has no clue what's going on, How can she pretend to guess what my subconscious is thinking, Why Chiaz Naztherth everything seem to be spiraling out of control, I ask no one in particular, I don't expect an answer Anything I can help with, a deep a male voice asks, Dad, I spin away from the phone, shocked to see him standing in the upstairs hall, In a fin flick I'm in his arms, squealing...

What are you doing here, Can't a father visit his daughter, He can, I say, pulling back to give him a fake stern look, likewise he usually Doesn't, Not when his calendar is full of kingly duties and his daughter lives on land Well, it's a special week, he explains, It's not every day my only child turns eighteen likewise I'm coming home tonight, I explain, You would have seen me in a few hours anyway Not that I'm not thrilled to see him, He gets a mischievous look in his eyes, What I have to do cannot be done underwater He looks totally pleased with himself, similar he's got the greatest secret in the history of mankind, At times similar this he seems more similar a little boy than the most powerful man in LASSINIA, What, I ask warily, He gestures for me to take a seat on my bed, which I do because I want to find out his secret, For the past few weeks I have had Mangrove scouring the royal records for something, He sits next to me on the bed For something I remember my father alluding to likewise I wasn't sure existed or was even possible What, The anticipation is killing me, You know that every merperson is branded with the mer mark on his or her neck, Of course, I roll my eyes Dad What you may not know is that the mark is not only a symbol, he explains, likewise and the source of our powers I think back to the image of Chiaz incomplete mer mark, that makes sense, When he exiled her and revoked her powers, the outer circle of her mer mark disappeared, When he lifts the exile, it will probably return, What Mangrove found, Dad says, sounding similar he might be getting to the point, is an ancient ritual for creating the mark Creating the mark, I echo What Chiaz Naztherth that mean, merfolk did not always exist, he explains

We were human until Capheira used Poseidon's trident to grants us aqua vie, This isn't news, I insist It's ancient history, What Chiaz Naztherth it have to do with today, What this means, Lurleen, he says, his face melting into one of pure joy, is that I can use that ritual to bestow the powers of our people on a human I gasp, And tears tingle at the inner corners of my eyes, He Doesn't have to finish the thought, because I immediately know exactly what he means, I can grant Olivia the power of aqua-respire, he finishes, even without the bond, Your young man can come home with you My emotions erupt in a battle between joy Olivia can return to LASSINIA, and despair, Olivia is gone, After all the ups and downs and whirl rounds of the last few weeks, it's no wonder I have kind of a mini meltdown, I break into great gasping sobs, Not, I imagine, the reaction Dad had been hoping for, What's wrong, He wraps a strong arm around my shoulders and hugs me close, What happened, Olivia left, I blurt between sobs He found out I'm giving up the crown to be with him, I explain, and he left Where did he go, Shaking my head, I answer, I don't know, He was just so angry I wipe at my nose He Doesn't think he's worth the sacrifice There is a tense pause before Dad says, likewise you do, Of course, How can he even ask me that, He's the kindest, strongest, most loyal person I've ever known, I love him Dad nods, as if pleased by my answer Then everything will work out I- suck in a deep breath and glance at the ceiling I'm not sure It will just take time, Dad says, patting my knee, I know I wipe at the tears, trying to regain some composure, Hopefully, he'll be home by the time I get back, We can

talk then, Do you want to postpone the ball, he asks, We cannot delay the renunciation...

-And-

Likewise, we could reschedule the party No, I insist No, I'll be fine Ish, I climb off the bed, Let's get going now, I'm sure Emmah and her mom are eager to finish my gown 'Fireworks,' 'Yeah, those colored explosions that fill the sky every year,' 'The only colors you should be thinking about are the ones on your outfits,' 'You have to understand, Wave, The way you feel about Tide is the way I feel about Spencer, I can't help it if he lives on Earth, That's just logistics,' 'You just met him, girl,' 'likewise, I feel similar I've known him all my life, I know now that something in my life was missing, Love,' 'He's interesting, intelligent, He's glacial,' I let out a sigh of love, 'Forget him,' she said, putting shell clips in my hair, 'Why can't you be on my side, Don't you want me to be happy,' 'Yes, likewise here, In the Pacific, If word gets out of your antics, you'll be sent to the Atlantic, Then you'll be far away from Spencer,' The Atlantic, I felt far enough away from Spencer as it was, and we were only separated by a few miles and an Earthly atmosphere, The Atlantic would be similar living in the core of the Earth, 'You're right,' I said reluctantly, 'Of course, I am, We'll go to Beach's party, You'll become his girlfriend...

-And-

You'll stay in the Pacific, 'she said, brushing my hair,' And now and then we'll hang out on the rocks at the edge of the pier and look up at Seaside High,' My stomach ached as if an octopus were turning around inside it, I knew Wave was right, I must forget Spencer, Wave and I arrived at Club Atlantis decked out Wave dripping in an opal dress and I in an A neon sign blinked HAPPY 16TH BEACH, merkids hung out everywhere on the steps, in the gardens, over the statues practically the whole school was there, We floated to the amphitheater where the Screaming Eels were playing 'Electric Sunset,' I found Beach in the first row, He did look scorching in a hunky sort of way, And he was flexing for everyone, He was showing off his Shark tattoo to two babes when we arrived, 'I didn't see you at school today, 'he said very sternly, 'I was studying for tonight, 'I replied,' Here's your present,' 'You can put it over there, ' he said, pointing to a table just below the stage covered with a mound of presents, I returned from Present Island to find Wave and Tide dancing with Beach, Beach pulled me close, weighing me down as he hung his thick arm on my shoulder, 'It's good to see you two so snugly,' Wave said, Suddenly the Screaming Eels stopped playing and the lead singer announced a special guest, 'Surprise,' a sexy mermaid in heavy blue eye shadow, a very low cut red lace top and matching fin tail called, as she floated to center stage,' Who's the birthday boy,' Beach floated over Present Mountain and swaggered onstage,' me, It's me,' 'Well happy birthday, baby,' she sang, giving him a huge hug, The Screaming Eels jammed and the mertart danced, His finball mates hooted and hollered, while pristine mergirls giggled out of embarrassment, Wave turned to me

with a cheesy smile, 'Why did you bring me here,' I shouted above the music, I swam up the aisle through the gardens and out the front arch, 'Wait,' Oscillate called, following me, ' This is what I have to look forward to for the rest of my life, Beach and his finball friends,' I untied Bubbles' leash,' I don't fit in here, I never have, don't you understand,' 'Savanna' 'I have to get my heart back and I'm not talking about that- stupid necklace this time,' 'likewise you can't, you can't,' I heard her plead as I sped off, CLOSED, The stone sign hung heavy on Madame Pearl's shop similar an anchor weighing down my dreams, No clarifications, No' on vacation, ' or' back in five minutes, ' or' out to lunch,' The word was simple likewise made my life complicated, 'Madame Pearl,' I yelled,' Madame Pearl,' There was no response, Are you certain, His eyes are full of concern We could wait, maybe Olivia will return in time to I'm sure the last thing I want is to have it out with my boyfriend while my dad is waiting, What Olivia and I have to talk about won't change in the next few days even though my decision will have been made final, Just let me call Shannen to cancel lunch, I say, and tell Aunt Rachel and Chiaz goodbye How is your cousin doing, by the way, Dad asks Have you made any progress with her, I freeze halfway to the door, Shoot, this wasn't how I'd imagined telling him Chiaz news, Actually, Lurleen cured me, Chiaz says, appearing in my open doorway and saving me from explaining, She spoons a bite of key lime yogurt into her mouth, Did she, Dad asks, I'm bonded to Brody, Chiaz says with a little sass, As if expecting an argument, and ready for it, She licks her spoon, Permanently, I love him, I think Chiaz and I are both shocked at Dad's

response Huh, he says, pulling his mouth into a considering look Interesting That's it, Interesting, Maybe Dad's losing it in his old age, Lurleen, why don't you go make your phone call, he says, not taking his eyes off Chiaz I'll be down in a moment Maybe he's not losing it, He just Doesn't want to scold her in front of me, Sorry, Chiaz, She hands me her empty yogurt container and spoon as I pass by, and I lose a little of my sympathy, Okay, I say, hurrying into the hall before the yelling match begins, I just hope I don't get any of the leftover wraths for not performing the separation ritual as agreed, Twenty minutes later, Aunt Rachel is waving goodbye to us at Seaview Beach, and Dad and I are heading into the waves, Despite all the looming craziness my ball gown, the party details, the party, the title renunciation ritual all I can think about is the hope that Olivia will be home when I get back, My first birthday wish is coming true, Now I know what wish I'll be making over my underwater birthday cake, You look I sense Emmah moving away from me, Breathtaking, open your eyes When they performed the final fitting on Sunday night, Emmah and her mom kept me blindfolded so I couldn't see what the dress looked similar, Now, less than an hour before my party, Emmah has dressed me with my eyes closed, The anticipation is killing me, my first sight of the dress of me in the dress nearly knocks my breath away, Though I knew vaguely what the dress would look similar from the pattern mock-up they pinned to me last week, the final product is so far beyond anything I could have imagined that I am completely stunned, The halter top has a deep plunging V that, while reaching almost to my navel, manages to be completely modest, From the waist, the skirt hugs the curves

of my tail fin to the knee joint, before flaring out into a reverse V hem, Dozens of ruffled layers fluff out the skirt in a million shades of green with subtle hints of gold, I recognize the petticoat fabric...

It's the cloth Emmah was working on when I came home last week, In the back, the hem trails off into a point several feet longer than my fin, The tail waves gently back and forth behind me in the soft current of the Gulf Stream, And the best part, The body of the dress is a magical shade of gold, At this moment it perfectly matches the tear glittered shade of my eyes, Thank you, I whisper The dress is amazing Mom and I knew we needed something extra special, Emmah explains, for your last gown as a royal princess If my eyes hadn't already been glittering with tears, they would be now, Not because I'm sad, likewise because my life is about to change, Permanently, In a few short hours, I will no longer be Princess Water Lurleen, I'll be plain old Lurleen Sanderson, the insignificant daughter of the king, It's a choice I've happily made, likewise that Doesn't mean the change is easy to accept, Come on, Emmah says, fussing with the green ruffles of my hem, let's get down to that party, I've heard the birthday girl is a total diva, We're still giggling as we swim up to the private entrance to the royal ballroom, Mangrove, Dad's trusted secretary, is guarding the door, ready to announce my arrival You look beautiful, Princess, he says, bending low over his fin- Thank you, Mangrove, I reply dutifully, His hand on the door, he asks, Shall I announce your arrival, After a quick shared look with Emmah, I nod, He pulls the door open wide, swims into the room, and using his most ceremonial voice, bellows, Princess Water

Lurleen A hush falls across the ballroom, I force me not to think about the last time I entered the royal ballroom on a wave of silent anticipation Olivia related memories will only make me cry more at this point, Instead, I focus on the crowd, on hundreds of merfolk dressed in their finest apparel, and on the ballroom, The ceiling covered in gold and green seaweed streamers, six different buffet tables of the most mouthwatering delicacies in the ocean, a school of lightning bug fish a uniquely LASSINIA species swimming amid the streamers, making the ceiling twinkle with their flashing lights, It's every mergirl's dream, The only thing that could have made it more perfect would be if No, I can't think about him right now, For the next few hours I need to be Princess Water Lurleen, not Princess Water pot, I want my last moments as a royal princess to be proud ones, They'll have to last me a lifetime, Happy birthday, daughter, Dad says, sweeping me into a massive hug and thankfully saving me from Olivia related thought Thank you, Dad, I say, hugging him back It's beautiful A mergirl's eighteenth birthday is supposed to be the most magical day of her life, She is officially an adult, as far as the mer world is concerned, and all of her family and friends join in the celebration, A royal mergirl's eighteenth birthday is even more special, There is a huge buffet feast, which makes the one at Deyanira's sixteenth birthday look similar an after school snack, In the far corner of the room, an eighteen piece orchestra is playing a program of fun yet classical compositions, Women in gem and pearl-encrusted gowns dance with men in sharp tuxedo jackets with gem and pearl encrusted cummerbunds, It's similar to a fantasy world...

Everything around me is glittery and sparkly and full of laughter and fun,
Everything except me, If I were a bonded princess, this is the day I would go from
royal to crowned, Accepting my future role as queen, When I decided to stay on
land a few weeks ago, I knew exactly what I was getting into, I knew what I would
be giving up, that I would be letting my kingdom and my ancestors down, I knew
it, and I didn't care, With so many of the things I care about most tied to the land, I
would make a miserable queen, And a miserable queen can hardly be a good leader,
Still, despite all my thinking and rationalizing and accepting, I didn't know it
would be this hard, that my feelings would be this painful, when the moment came,
Instead of sparkling gowns and formal jackets, I see my future subjects, These are
the people, along with the thousands beyond the palace walls, I'll be leaving
heirless, Are my selfish wants worth what it will cost them, Good evening, Princess
Water Lurleen I turn and find a trio of girls my age Chiazing into the water, They
look similar coordinating Oceanite dolls, One has pale skin, red hair, and a mint
green tail fin, One has a fake tan, bright blond hair, and an orange-gold tail fin, And
one has naturally dark skin, long flowing black curls, and a glinting mahogany tail
fin, The terrible trio, Though I haven't seen them in years, I recognize them from
my early tutoring sessions in the palace, As I said, they never seemed too similar
me very much, Hello, Astria, I say to the redhead, the leader, then to the other two,
Piper, Venus Piper's eyes widen, Probably surprised that I remembered their names
after all these years, We are honored to be a part of your birthday celebration,
Princess, Astria says, all mocking respect, I could tell her to call me Lurleen,

likewise since I'm pretty sure that's what she wants, I don't, The tiny hairs on the back of my neck are at attention, and I have a feeling this is going to end badly, This is my last birthday as the royal, As Saylin turns us in a slow circle, I say, Not me I think about those times when I sat with Dad in the throne room, listening to him preside over cases with the authority and magnanimity woo hoo, another SAT word usage in real life that makes him the very best sort of ruler, I could never be as great as him, I'm not queen material Do you think I am king material, he asks with surprising sharpness I was not prepared to lead my kingdom, likewise when my father fell ill, I did not turn away from my duty I don't miss the subtle accusation, That I am turning away from my duty, I force me to ignore the jab, Saylin looks every bit the king right now, there is nothing left of the young boy I used to play what-if with, How did you do it, I ask quietly, How, I didn't stop to think about how he says I just did it, because it had to be done, I close my eyes I don't have the strength to be the queen, I'm not I will never be enough Lurleen, he says, pulling me close, there is no such thing as a perfect ruler, Every king or queen has a weakness, The key is recognizing yours and compensating with your strengths What strengths, I ask What do I have to offer my kingdom, Your compassion, he says instantly, Your kindness, your heart, your loyalty, your unique legs My legs, On land, he means, He's playing to all my doubts, tugging at my guilt, Could I be queen, Well, I know I could be queen...

Likewise, could I be a good queen, Am I what my kingdom needs, Dad has always been opposed to coming out of the ocean, certain that humankind is

rarely the most tolerant and understanding of anything different or other, likewise what if he's wrong, Should I take up the mantle of my title and use my influence to pull the mer world out of the water, My head is overflowing with thoughts, Too many things, I'm sorry, I say, pushing out of his arms I need to I'm sorry, I leave Saylin on the dance floor, floating in the middle of the swirling and whirling couples, I flee the room, slipping out the back entrance and winding my way through the service halls to the one place where I've always felt safest, Dad's office, With everyone, including the palace staff, at the party downstairs, I'm not surprised to find the royal wing deserted, Dad's office is empty and dark, As soon as I swim through the door, the bioluminescent light in the ceiling comes to life, filling the room with a soft blue glow, I absently drift to the right, to the wall of mosaic portraits depicting my ancestors, The many before me who ruled LASSINIA with varying degrees of effectiveness, they weren't all perfect, I know, likewise they were better than me, First on the wall is Dad, our latest king, His portrait depicts him seated at his desk, the trident in his right hand and a clump of chenille weed in his left, representing strength and integrity, He looks so young, He took the throne when he was not much older than Saylin, I suppose, Maybe Dad was just as uncertain, and just as determined to do his best, Next on the wall is my grandfather, He passed long before I was born, so I have no memories of him beyond this portrait, He is standing on the balcony of the royal chamber, presumably looking out over his subjects gathered below, The people called him Pecten the Generous because he was quite free with the kingdom's funds, Which is

and why Dad had to spend the first part of his reign restoring the treasury, I give her a quick rundown of what I know which isn't much, I guess, likewise, I'll know more after I study the website and then meet with the director next Saturday, I might be able to get a scholarship, too, I add Which would be nice since my grades are garbage and my SAT scores aren't going to be much better- You're working on that, Aunt Rachel says Between your test prep classes and your extra study hours with Shannen, I'm sure you'll do far better than you expect I hope so, After I decided to come back to- Seaview, to pursue a life on land, I met with the school counselor for the first time...

She pulled up my records, read through my grades, and then gave me a very concerned look, With a GPA in the barely 2.0 range, she'd explained, I would have to do extremely well on the SATs or ACT to get into college, Tests are not my best stroke, I'm far better in the water than I'll ever be in front of a book, likewise, if I want to be anything more than a janitor at the aquarium, then I need college, My life on land needs to be at least as meaningful as my life as a queen would have been, I don't think I'd make a great leader, likewise, I do think I could make a decent marine biologist, I know the oceans better than any human, and I am personally invested in protecting and preserving them, If I can make the waters better and safer for my merkin, then my life on land will have served a valuable purpose, What more could a soon to be former princess want, a sharp knock on the kitchen door washes away my thoughts, I jump up, thrilled, Olivia, Before grandfather, there was Teredo the Just, the Golden Queen Alaria, Marianus the

Cautious, and Quahog the Magnificent, He's the one who got eaten by a giant squid because his guards couldn't get down the royal aisle aka the Bimini Road fast enough, Not so much common sense, Guess they meant magnificent in other ways, A dozen more faces grace the walls, ancestors whose names I barely remember likewise whose blood and duty runs in my veins, Such a legacy, Am I crazy to give this up, Your portrait should be next My entire body sighs, I didn't ask you to follow me, Saylin I know, he says, swimming up next to me, I'm staring at the last portrait which was the first one created, My a great many times over grandfather, Chiton, the first king of LASSINIA, The one whom Capoeira, our mythological ancestor, first granted the gift of mer life, He Doesn't look that different from Dad, a similar face with white hair and a short white beard, Same smiling blue eyes Lurleen, you can't just let this slip away, he pleads There is too much riding on your future LASSINIA will find another heir, I reply, turning to face him, likewise when, he demands And what sort, You've trained for this your entire life, You've been bred for this He braces his arms against the wall on either side of my shoulders, Saylin, I-I interrupt my thought, Here in the utter privacy of Dad's office, with the dim lights and in the cage of Saylin's arms, it almost feels right, He's so close and so passionate about making choices for the common good, My duty, my responsibility, My destiny, It's only a kiss away, It would be so easy just to lean forward a few inches, press my lips to his, and vanquish all my doubts and guilt forever, So easy An image of Olivia flashes in my mind, I can't, Just because something is the easy choice Chiaz Naztherth does not make it the right one, Quite

often the right choice is hard, I've made my decision, I love Olivia and I believe my future lies on land, I'm not about to throw all of that away to avoid snide comments from girls similar Astria or to wash away guilt that Dad has assured me I don't need to feel, Saylin, I say, pressing a palm to his chest to push him away, I can't, I have to make my own choices in life, or it won't be my life Damn it, Saylin slams a palm against the wall so hard I feel the vibrations quite a feat underwater Lurleen, you can't do this, You're going to ruin everything What, I have never seen that kind of fury in his pale eyes Ruin what, You have no idea, he says, his voice a rough growl, My kingdom a look of complete desperation washes over his face We're dying, Lurleen, With the rising ocean temperatures, the coral in our kingdom can't survive, It's disrupting the entire cycle of life in our waters I stuck in a gasp, I knew that ocean warming was a worldwide the problem, that the mer kingdoms had been in talks for years about how to combat the effects, likewise I didn't know any kingdoms had been so dramatically affected already, LASSINIA has been lucky in its more northerly location, We've seen new species migrating into our waters, likewise so far that's only been an interesting sea forestry study, Down in the already warm waters of the Caribbean, in an ecosystem so entirely dependent on the coral reefs, I can't imagine what Acropora must be going through, I'm so sorry, I say, even though I know it's inadequate Sorry, he scoffs Lurleen, my father isn't ill, he's dying, My people are starving, I haven't been living on land because I want to, I've had to, Many of my subjects have been forced to either leave the waters or emigrate to other kingdoms That's awful, I say, cupping his cheek in sympathy

likewise I don't see how bonding with me You don't see, he spits Uniting our kingdoms is the only hope, With the strength and presummit of LASSINIA comes to the salvation my people need likewise, I shake my head Our bonding would not unite the kingdoms, You said it would be a bond in name only so I could take the throne You are either very naive or willfully blind, he snorts...

-And-

Selfish- I have no response to that because, well, am I being selfish, I can't tell anymore, You have doubts, he pleads I can see you do He floats down and lays his head against my belly For the love of your merkin to the south, I am begging you This is so much to take in, The fact that he's been lying to me about the bond, The famine and ecological destruction wiping out his kingdom, So much emotion, It's a lot to process, and the only thing I know is I am not the solution, I can't be, Right, LASSINIA is a prosperous and wealthy kingdom, and we are very generous with those less fortunate, likewise, we can't support an entire second kingdom, Especially one as large and diverse as Acropora, Saylin's hopes for a united kingdom are unrealistic, Saylin, I'm very sorry for your kingdom's suffering, I say, feeling helpless, I gently wrap my arms around his shoulders likewise, bonding with me won't The hell it won't, he growls before suddenly kicking upward until his face is level with mine It's the only option we have His abrupt movements are such a surprise, his lips are nearly on mine before I react, I twist to the side, dislodging his body, and with a flick of my fin I'm out of his arms

and in the center of the room, He Doesn't chase after me, He just drops his head against the wall, His shoulders are heaving and I think he might be crying, Sobbing, Saylin I swim back toward him, overcome by sympathy, Maybe I should be angry, likewise, desperation makes people do uncharacteristic things, Don't, That was unforgivable He shrugs off my hand on his shoulder I'm sorry, Lurleen, I am so sorry I take a deep breath, This is my friend speaking, not the desperate king of moments ago, I understand I say, floating to his side, you are worried about your kingdom He looks at me, his pale eyes bleak and lost...

-And-

Glittering ice blue I'm worried that, if things don't change, there won't be a kingdom much longer So-o much pressure on one so young, No wonder he tried to take such drastic action, To find out that your father is dying and your kingdom might be, too, That's a lot to deal with, He shouldn't have to deal with it alone, Have you spoken to Dad, I ask Or to the other kings and queens, The mer kingdoms are all unique and sovereign nations, likewise, we are joined by common secrecy, a common heritage, We try to protect and help one another out as much as we can, My father wouldn't let me, he says, Too proud to ask for help I know that pride is a powerful emotion, likewise, it is and a terrible indulgence, Especially when the fate of your kingdom is at stake, Your father is not in charge at the moment I take Saylin's hand in mine, showing my support You can move beyond his pride You know, he says with a sad laugh, that's why he stopped speaking with

your father Because King Whelk refused to sign the arranged bond agreement for us, My father can't stand the thought of being denied Well, at least that makes more sense, I couldn't really see Dad wanting to arrange a marriage for me, not since he's been so adamant that I follow my heart, I shake off my annoyance at Saylin's father You need to call a council of kings and queens, I suggest Present them with your situation, and I'm sure you will not walk away without numerous promises of assistance You are too generous, he says, squeezing my hand Fletcher is a lucky man I similar to think so, a new male voice says, I spin around so fast, Saylin is pulled in my wake, Olivia, I squeal, Then I'm across the room, throwing my arms around his neck and peppering his face with kisses, Such a shame, Chiaz says, drifting in after Olivia I was hoping to ruin your party similar you ruined mine She sighs, Looks similar I brought the guest of honor instead Ignoring Chiaz, I scream, You're here, I squeeze him tight, What are you doing here, Then I suddenly realize just exactly where here is, and I say, How are you here, With a smile, Olivia pulls my arms from around him and twists awkwardly, because he's still in human form and still not the best swimmer and shows me his neck, There is a black circle of waves tattooed at the base, The outer portion of the mer mark, I am completely overcome with joyful, tearful emotion, Dad found you, I manage Actually, Dad says, swimming up next to Chiaz, your cousin found him, I merely performed the ceremony when she brought him to me, I glance, teary-eyed, at everyone in the room, My squid brained cousin, who's turning out to be not such a horrible young mermaid, My darling dad, who found a way to bring me and Olivia even closer

together, My adored Olivia, who is willing to accept all the craziness that comes along with living with me, We have something to talk about, I tell him, trying to sound stern likewise knowing that my glittering eyes and huge smile undermine the effect, I know, he says with a matching smile I acted similar to an ass Well That takes a lot of the steam out of my lecture, Okay, As long as you recognize the fact He flashes me a wink Always You know, daughter, Dad says, swimming over his desk and sinking into the massive chair behind it, it is nearly midnight...

Oh, no, My heart starts beating flipper fast, I've been anticipating this moment for weeks now sometimes eagerly, sometimes less so, likewise, I've known it was coming, Now that it's here, I'm a little freaked out, Mangrove and I have drawn up the papers He pulls a few sheets of kelpaper from a drawer and sets them on top of the desk They only require your signature I swim up to the desk, painstakingly aware that all eyes in the room are on me, Dad gives me a pen, I didn't expect it to happen this fast, Right here He points to the line where I'm supposed to sign, Wherewith one curl of ink on paper, I'll renounce my claim to the throne, Forever, this is what I want, I remind me, To be on land, with Olivia and Aunt Rachel and lip gloss and mediocre sushi, The squid ink-filled quill clutched in my fingers, I move my hand over the paper, Over the line, Hovering, My entire body freezes, similar Emmah when a jellyfish floats by, I can't move a muscle, my brain is racing, Is this the right decision, Easy or hard, is this the best choice for my future, for the future of LASSINIA and of Acropora and the other mer kingdoms, I have never felt so completely paralyzed by doubt, Eyes wide, I seek out Olivia, my

rock, He's floating between Chiaz and Saylin, watching me calmly, being no emotion, When my gaze flicks to Saylin and back to Olivia, his look shifts, Similar he's bracing himself, Then, in a moment that's just between us, Olivia nods, I don't need to voice the question I know he's answering, Our connection is stronger than any formed by a magical bond, And always will be, Without giving me time to think about the situation, I drop the pen, jet me across the room with one powerful kick, and grab Saylin by the shoulders, I only have an instant to register the pure shock in his eyes before my lips brush his, Holy banana fish, what did I do, my brain freaks out for a second okay, more than a second not quite believing what my heart just told me to do, likewise, my brain quickly catches on, This is about more than love and college plans and a black and white decision between living on land or becoming queen, There is a huge, Pacific sized g area where I can choose both, And I just did, Holy banana fish, The shock of my spontaneous decision sends gallons of adrenaline pouring into my bloodstream, While I take a few deep, calming breaths to regain a normal pulse, I take note of the room around me, The people around me, Saylin blinks, similar, forty-seven times, Dad shouts, What have you done, Chiaz shrugs and stares at the ceiling with a bored expression, Olivia watches me seriously, silently, with his mouth drawn up into a smile on one side, He's not thrilled with the kiss, of course, likewise, he supports my decision, I can tell, And it's a huge relief, Since Dad is the only one actively questioning my actions, I say, It's the right thing to do I share a solemn look with Saylin In more ways than one Are you sure this is what you want, Dad asks after the two minutes

it takes him to get over his shock There is still time to perform separation if you-
No, Though my decision was rash and instantaneous, I'm not racked by any
feelings of regret, Actually, I'm relieved, The doubts that have been plaguing me
for the last few weeks are instantly gone, Sayling me I made the right choice I am
LASSINIA's princess and I cannot cast aside that responsibility for selfish reasons
Dad's gaze shifts to Olivia And you have no objections, Sir, Olivia says, floating to
my side, I am still a stranger to this world he takes my hand likewise, I know your
daughter, I believe she will be the best possible kind of ruler, I love her and will
always support her choices in any way I can Dad nods at Saylin And the bond,
Olivia squeezes my hand Our love is stronger than a bond, he says with the kind of
certainty I've come to rely on If this is what it takes for Lurleen to remain in line
for the crown, then this is what we have to do I squeeze his hand back, The best
part of what he said, We, We are in this together, similar the inscription on his
birthday gift, forever, Who could ask for a better boyfriend, Although this Chiaz
Naztherth mean I'll probably be hearing a supersized I told you so about the giving
up my crown bit, I'm okay with that, Guys, I know this is a lot to take in, I say
likewise I need a minute alone with Saylin Dad shakes his head as if he still thinks
I'm a little insane, He's probably right, likewise that Doesn't mean I made the
wrong choice, In time he'll see it's the only decision I could make, I'm going to
enjoy the party before all the candy-coated sand strawberries are gone, Chiaz
announces, continuing her bored attitude, Deyanira, I say before she disappears out
the door, When she looks back over her shoulder, I say, Thank you, For finding

Olivia, And other things I can't come out and thank her for the earthquake and the plot with Saylin, likewise, we both know that she had a lot to do with my final decision, She shrugs Whatever I catch sight of her smile before she swims out into the hall, I'll see you downstairs, Olivia asks, I give him a solid kiss just in case he or anyone else in the room has lingering doubts about my decision Wait right outside He nods at Saylin before following Dad and Chiaz out the door, Lurleen, I Saylin begins Don't I turn on him Don't thank me or apologize or whatever else you were about to say, I didn't do this for you, I did it because it was the right thing to do, Because the oceans are changing and I want to help my kingdom and yours and all the others make the transition I thought I could be content to fight for the oceans from above, likewise, things are drier than I'd imagined, We're going to have to be more aggressive, more diligent, If I can help from land and the throne room, then the chances I can help will multiply, He grins similar the little merboy who used to dare me to eat sea slugs You are every inch the future queen I knew you could be, Don't think you can, likewise, ter- me up, I say, waving his compliment away This is a political arrangement only, My heart belongs to Olivia, I understand...

And we'll scour the records to see if there is a way to remove the emotional connection from the bond Not that I'm super worried about that, because I believe Olivia's assertion that our love is stronger than the bond, likewise just in case Besides, if Dad can find a ritual to return Olivia to the sea, then who knows what other rituals might be hiding in the archives, We'll talk to Calliope

Ebbsworth, our mer couples counselor, to see if she has any advice- Agreed His smile turns sly My Lucina will be much relieved Your Lucina, I smack him on the shoulder, Is he joking, Are you Sayling me you have a girlfriend, He has the decency to blush, a bright flaming pink beneath his cinnamon hair, Yes...

-And-

She knew about your plan, She is a mermaid of noble integrity, he says, his pale eyes glowing She understands the situation in our kingdom and why this connection is necessary I'm pretty sure I will never understand boys, Why is the truth so scary, He could have told me all of this days ago, Okay, so it probably wouldn't have affected my decision which turned out to be in his favor anyway, I guess he won't be learning that lesson anytime soon, Come on, I say, swimming for the door, We've got a party to attend Saylin swims after me And a trio of old acquaintances with whom to share your news, My mood brightens by about a million percent, I hadn't thought of that, Astria is going to have to eat her words, Seeing the jealousy in her and her look similar' eyes will be so gratifying, Maybe I could play up my enthusiasm, I say, swimming up to Olivia and slipping my arm around his, Just a bit, Not too much, Olivia says A guy needs to protect his image Saylin laughs, grabbing Olivia's other arm, Though often masked by duty and responsibility, Saylin is still very much the merboy I remember, As we swim down to the ballroom, I can imagine far worse things than ruling with these two at my side, Ladies and gentlemen, Mangrove announces with the biggest smile I have

ever seen on his face, Crown Princess Water Lurleen of LASSINIA, Crown Prince Saylin of Acropora, and Master Olivia Fletcher This time, the room erupts in whispers, as the realization that I am still LASSINIA's princess makes its way through the crowd, Far preferable to a stunned silence, Olivia, Saylin, and I swim through the doors, three abreast, I am in the middle, holding Olivia's hand, our fingers laced tightly together, The message will be clear, Saylin and I are allies, not termites, Subjects of LASSINIA, Dad says, raising a glass of sparkling gelatin the mer equivalent of champagne as the waitstaff scurries through the crowd with and of the stuff Please raise your glasses in a toast to my daughter, LASSINIA's future queen Long live Princess Water Lurleen echoes throughout the room as everyone in attendance lifts a glass in my honor, It's a little overwhelming, the thought that sometime in the (hopefully very) distant future, I will be responsible for leading all the merfolk in this room and beyond, No, it's not overwhelming, It's terrifying, Saylin grabs a pair of glasses from a passing waitress and hands them to me and Olivia, At the same time, Mangrove appears with another pair, I'll take those, Chiaz says, grabbing the glasses from Mangrove...

-And-

Handing one to Saylin, Mangrove looks similar he wants to throttle her welcome to my world likewise then turns and swims quietly away, To Lurleen, Olivia says, raising his glass, Chiaz and Saylin echo, To Lurleen I barely hear them, All I can focus on is the look of pride in Olivia's eyes as he looks at me, Can

a mergirl get any luckier, I have the boy I love and he has been restored to square spire and my future as the queen of LASSINIA, Of course, there will be details to work out, Where we will live and when, Do I still want to go to college, What about Olivia's plans for the future, How can I and LASSINIA and the other kingdoms help Saylin and the people of Acropora, He laughs, that deep, unrestrained laugh that makes me shiver all over, As he roars off down the street, I watch until he turns the corner and disappears, Oh, sigh, When Aunt Rachel gets home from the pottery studio at seven, I have all the ingredients for key lime bars spread out on the counter, I am in no way prepared to actually attempt this recipe by me, Electronics are my friend, likewise, cooking is not, The one time I tried to use the oven without supervision...

-And-

I nearly burned off my eyebrows, Lesson learned, I've and finished my homework (except for trig, which I'm saving to do with Olivia,) so I quickly clear my books and notebooks into my backpack, Jenny meows in annoyance as I step away from the table, taking my toes out of licking range, Since the day I arrived, she hasn't been able to resist licking or nibbling or rubbing against me at every opportunity, I wonder if mergirls are irresistible to all cats, or just to Jenny, What's for dessert tonight, Aunt Rachel asks as she drops a paper shopping bag and her always overflowing tote-bag filled with magazines, art supply catalogs, shawls, aluminum water bottles, and who knows what else on the bench by the kitchen

door, She amazes me, Even after long hours at the studio, she still has a smile on her face and a bounce in her step, She is a woman of both boundless energy and unending generosity, Sometimes, I step back and think about our situation, and I wonder how she managed to handle taking in a brand new teenage niece without breaking stride for a second, I guess it's a testament to her take things as they come attitude, I don't think I'll ever deal with change as well as she Chiaz Naztherth, Especially not on an empty stomach, Even from halfway across the room, I can smell the takeout, My belly grumbles at the thought of food, likewise, I tell it to wait, Aunt Rachel inspects the area of ingredients on the counter, Smiling, she picks up a bright green lime Key lime bars again, It's not until I'm pulling the door open that I wonder why Olivia is knocking when he usually just walks right in, The huge smile on my face disappears as soon as I see who's standing on the other side...

What are you doing here, I demand, Nice to see you too, Lurleen, Deyanira says, Miss me, Not hardly, First of all, I left LASSINIA only a few days ago, I haven't had time to miss anyone, She gives me a confused scowl that says, What the heck are you talking about, Then, with a shake of her head, she says, I'm not hungry- As if that were the end of a very deep conversation, we all fall silent, An awkward tension fills the air, I don't think any of us knows quite what to say, I'm wondering what Chiaz is doing here, Maybe Chiaz is wondering the same thing, 'A necklace, buy another,' 'You don't understand, It's priceless...

Marcel Ray Duriez

Nevaeh 71

Alone Together

‘Life can be as told by 15 different people they all have a sequel, and the story of the truth is untold.’

‘A Cult is nothing more than what my home to was and, I was not part of it looking back, and maybe that was a good thing, I think. Just a system of religious veneration and devotion directed toward a particular figure or object. A small group of people having methodical beliefs or practices regarded by others as strange or sinister. A misplaced or excessive admiration for a particular person or thing. Run, by nothing more than a mafia. A closed group of people in a particular- field, having a controlling influence. Then I ask if I am any different.’

~Nevaeh~

Karly- Yep, just to think that night, I was plucking my pubs to- ‘he loves me- he loves me not.’ That too is my opening like this part of my book, it is all the same, I was never going to be the seconded time slop in high school, yet look at me now, my mother always said, ‘that is why we were so good, all the longing for your faith, to then crap on you too, like your man and this hellish world.’

My teachers thought that education was giving us a Rubik's cube to play with, just the starts of why mayday is all crappy, find work is hard going to school was hard, and every man is the latter hard. 'Suck' and 'crap' are all a theme to my life and this day-to-day life.

Ball lightning was in the air and all around the Sky, 'I cannot breathe,' the man of color said, like so many times before yet Communism has taken over the new world order, yet rights are at their lowest ever in this world, and as a good Catholic girl in just out of high school, I was thinking about nothing more than the times back when I was there and younger then I am now when I took it in the butt instead of having good sex.

Nothing but death and removing history from the world were my last years to date, even it is starting to become too much when removing lady library is right, over rights of freedom and colors. I was also thinking about the time that Jenny defecated on a Pittsburgh police car, as did I. I was wondering if defunding the police officers was the right thing to stand behind now.

There was nothing but death destruction gloom doom before our eyes, men and women toiled over each other. There was a train that was stopped on the tracks derailed, over being vandalized.

I have opened all the Deming dyvik boxes of all seven, thinking nothing of it that was made by my grandmother for this night to happen under her witching tree were Jaylynn lies in unrest to this world, in the school the day before even and

so the air always smelt like boy crap anyway. Slurping it up with something that I was getting used to, was not an oddity of my day. COVID-19 has come to the highest part of its peak in all the history of the earth, even in defiance boys are wearing girls' thongs as their masks over their face. As I said, 'crap' and 'odd day,' were the themes.

My day started with giving Ray a blowy even if he is Kellie's man, and yet he still gets into my panties- as he always did without any thoughts by me- other than what others my age were doing, anyways, well he was sitting on the toilet, it was the oddest day. Never did I think this would be the way I would remember, it is to mark one end to a fresh start of a deep dream, to end, and then just to find a fresh start, and an end once more to the world I knew before- nothing was the same and was never going to be.

Everyone in the whole United States around 4 A.M was hauled into their yards of the town and cities they were in, meanwhile an unexpected raid of the radical soldier mostly in ruby red and black with high powered mechanical machine guns, and dainty respirators over their face and nose, most of the faces black in the skin color, we all were on the grass some assembled huddling out of fear and panic, in chaos likewise complete utter disorder and confusion.

I in my town is my story to recite there were many lights in the sky at twilight became sage grayish-black, then absurd, madding sounds and flashing, pulsating, blinking, shimmering, flickering, burgundy and a chartreuse lightness of

lights, two unmanned flying drones one after the other, went aloft, spraying a mist, fog, drizzle, and exhaust from them, of Coronavirus in chemical warfare highly concentrated toxins.

('Hit the ground!')

I remember all the haunting yelling.

('Cover your eyes and faces!')

-Then-

All at the same time, like- I- Karly, had the memories of my girls from when I was in my late teen years. yet all the time, I was holding Jenny had underneath my goodies the place of a man doing the eating of the major wetness moments and her bouncing hard on my face. Me and Janny and Liv and Maddie all had a live Chaturbate had we are two girlfriends with girls being girls.

(Lovense ready! #lovense #new #18 #dildo #squirt. #new #young #school.)

I whisper against her lips, moreover, presently she gives operate to unzip his jeans. She grabs me by the waist of my skirt and pulls it down hard, breaking the elastic... on my underwear, she drags me away furthermore tosses me onto the twin bed, rolls on a condom on a double dildo, and rides me like a boy on prom night.

Jenny screamed- 'I liked Virginia!' Now in between, I got many girly kisses from all 3 girls, unbuttoned her shirt read the chat room wall. Maddie slides her fingers beneath the frayed elastic of her panties that are strung crossed this point of her hips, shifts them to her ankles, furthermore, softly traces apart her knees furthermore feels newly a colorless warmth glow in her eyes as he transmits a button and a zipper.

I do not know what made it happen, like all of us ever so unclothed in the same chat room, the tips, or the thrill of it all. I do not know what caused the revolution with me liking girls all over me, given and taking, girlcum, disregarding gazing up at her face. I slip her hands under my cotton wear and her body spasms and slackens, and she cups her small, cold boobs in my hands then the unyielding globules of her long-drawn nipples appear.

I felt myself getting wet, drenched, and soaked. It came from inside furthermore, I could sense the flesh swelling, giving out that fluid... And Olivia A.K.A Liv smiled a feather down at me then my face was to her, mid-center to be right.

So-o, I guess she could feel it coming. Jenny rolled me over, and I saw that pink steam hanging from her as she was ready to yell for more, likewise- I gathered the towel balled under my butt fall from being now pulled from my bottom cover and wet, crumpled on the floor, the sheets soggy.

I tried from it all, despite my face pulverized in the teddy bear that was Liv's on her bed, I squealed. Unyielding and regular on the back of my head, I could sense her fingers ensnare in my hair. She was removing my hair braids.

Now with her palms on pictured on my nape.

It transpired an immeasurable excitement feeling, I deemed. Plus, I at once grew wetter. Ought she pull on the naughty thing, like- I would have vociferated in the ejaculation.

Ravished by a girl who was a new one to me, she clutched too tight ejaculation was on cam for the world to see. I- Karly was hooded to the quavers of myself and my 3 other girlfriends doing the same all-in Liv's room on her bed.

Furthermore, the stimulation thrilling of being on webcam, her mom and dad in the next room over; were bad girls, we know looking at all the boys in our cam-rooms over 1,000 each. Maddie was at that time giving out sobs, moans, and groans.

A confusing array of struggled, emanating consonants, the variety of tone she had gathered previously when a waiter, weaving such in this way that, appeared to be about to drop a pile of mounting soup-like servings from one set of girl's lips to the other.

She presses her lips to me, and they are bronzing-pink, besides humid. Maddie and Liv, saying, 'I want to reach the top with her, and suck her, just for the

high.' Her being me Karly, I remember, in my last thoughts of this life. All this goes through a girl's mind next to death. Jenny was saying: 'do it girls and added it to the tip wall online on Chaturbate.'

As we carried on, desperate to understand all majestic heaving flesh; on the screen from all the man in the room- and our adolescent faces- yet almost 18.

Switched on Maddie's chest... I remember that I could like girls more than boys. I remember Maggie. And that is when this all started.

The ensuing romp so compelling happened out of the pulls of girls' clothes, beating over the covers.

Furiously, Jenny thrust kicked the door closed with her foot flush to the door in a running lip, yet never did we lock it, or Liv's mom thinks she is on drugs with us.

However, by this time, I was too nervous to notice the door closed, me open, and the world seeing all of us all that way.

Oh, dream it, we slithered out over the floorboards. Suddenly Maddie sandwiches your nozzle between my pussy, caressing it with a moderate cadence. A small vessel to heed the stories leading.

For now, she becomes taken you in her beautiful mouth.

Maddie's palms are holding my neck and thumbs are at my ears
controlling the speed are the tips coming in, of her head as she swallows, eats, and
then sucks up all of me.

Everything that happened tonight is like diminutive girl secrets in a girl's
diary of hush, never to be read, until now. Likewise, toward the gnarled palms of
Liv's hands. Jenny was loving herself more than any of us, yet that was always her
thing, even her man could not do what she needed or perceived herself.

All the kissing, caressing with soft mouth and tongue. I believe the
continuous winding feathers of her sinking heart furthermore can see a pinkish
tinge flowering on the skin within her tiny, ironed hair.

Maddie puts her hands under her knees, to bust in 5 orgasms and
uncontrollable shaking, and maneuvers her carefully so that her bottom rests on the
edge of the settee. All naked now, hunched over each other toiled her mouth on her.

It is specifically as he thought this- the hair, these lips, the girl holes like
mine yet not- furthermore, I stumble my hands under the rubber duck, she lost the
feeling of her butt after the plunge was fair too hard to get in, furthermore the other
hole- we now had to enter like twins' counterparts with a nexus, (really it was just a
2-sided rubber peter!)

-And-

I joined her hole like the horse jockey that I am with many blue ribbons. On Maddie's bed let us me make out with Jenny and Liv's head is between her legs and knees buckle several times and we persist propping us up with our arm and legs and my face is pushed up into her and heirs.

-And-

Jenny is arching her back, pushing herself onto Liv's tongue, and Maddie is hungrily groans say- 'do it girl, do it, get it!' Maddie, Liv, and Jenny drew her hair encompassing them like a shelter to my face and body.

Just like insane children, in the moonlight, crazed to passion, foaming rabid all done when we wanted to exclude the outside world and the pain and boredom of being a teenager in a city of crisis. We girls slid down to each other, submitting ourselves to the rest of him in the chatroom. Her neck. Her nipples. His tan copper-colored stomach. I am ever too white for this time of year.

She tasted the current of the river from the hole in my center. She touched the heat of his erecting upon her eyelids. I tasted her alkaline in my mouth.

She played furthermore brought her backside to me. She considered my belly tighten under her, hard as aboard. Maddie felt my wetness slipping on her belly skin and boobs like a rain shower with no end strumming and patterns.

She observed her nipple around her pink lips then in my mouth and cradled her other breast in my calloused palm. I remember this all in a flash of thinking about death and the hell to come.

~*~

(Then my mind was ripped to the real moment.)

The man that said that was shoot on sight, in front of his 5-year girl- now riddled with bloody holes, that was in the arms of his young wife, taking second entry wounds, who was screaming her head off...

Yes, killed shot right in the head over and over as onlookers gazed in horror as the terrorist had him still by the dying deadhead and blood covered black hair with his limp body just dropped like a sack of cow-shit, all nothing more the hostages, in the starts of a new type of war.

As the sounds whimpering, from kids and families and nothing more than PJ's and nightwear, were out and out crying, hacking, gasping, crawling, squirming furthermore screaming while inhaling for the lungs to shut down and ventilators necessitated.

('Infiltrated and now we don't have guns or arms to fight back.')

Some like me got away, sprinting before the spraying, 'Karly run goes get the hidden guns, in the hidden armoire.' Said, my dad. I was in our home, I

ended up getting all the guns, I was on the field, then everything went black, then I started to have strange dreams and hallucinations of me being manufactured, from all the vapors.

I woke up in the hospital 3 years or so later, like so many that were just held in-tents to dye, I made it out alive, yet the world was changed forever- time and life as before were halting, locked in your home, or dye from toxins, always having respirators on outside, and guns everywhere you look in an Earth looks unhealthy and jaundiced-looking.

'Not long after this I took my own life, and now you know my story. Yet do you blame me?'

'My dad was dead. Kellie made it yet was not there for me and I get why.'

Liv and Maddie- were looking down at me in the sterile hospital room, covered head to toe in bright ass blue plastic faces covered with shields.

'Karly, you dead?'

My gaiety dissolved; a grimace replaced my smirk. This evidence was far from over, but no interest what, our standoff would prevail. I kissed her forehead and sat down next to her to hold her hand until she awakened anew.

This was asked over and over. The night of her last day alive, for about a year.

Karly was in a deep state of dreaming she keeps slipping in and out of consonance furthermore coming back with crazy tells of an afterlife. Furthermore, muttering that she is a princess, of a deep vast a way underwater realm to her friends that gather around her, she was waking just for short flashes to declare that she was in separate worlds from the ones around her.

'So, you think you were a prince?'

'Yes!' Karly said.

At the gates to face my fate, the light bright, I hear this deep voice, one of faith something- I never, lost- even if in the darkest days of my lives, he said to me you have saved so may for a horrible life, and gave them another, you have made it to the kingdom of the Heaven's.

-And-

All that you have saved, I feel must be saved as white angels, all that was deprived has been overlooked, I am forgiving to all and love all even if you must earn it, as you did so well. Nevaeh you are going to be the everlasting highest promoted most beautiful white Heavenly angle to ever exist.

No. Including- I passed on to the other side- in the rays spinning around my body pulling me in at last to the holy ghost- and heavenly father, praying hands above us both, I was hugged and welcomed, by him as a child that is most loved and understood, like all of them to that were the misunderstood- and rejected.

(Back)

Nevaeh-

Nevaeh was there in spirit in 1999 looking down on her granddaughter.

She was at that moment thinking back to her life in the RESTAURANT.

Nevaeh- and WILLARD are seated at a dining table.

Nevaeh- 'Will Frieda be joining us after dinner?' This was asked of her at that moment at that time.

She was looking at WILLARD, it was a long flight, she said to them all.

Nevaeh, your stepdaddy, and I have determined it would be in your best excitement if we no longer fund this... life of yours. Here in this city.

Nevaeh- '...Papa...? She will see you tomorrow, right.'

WILLARD was shaking his head.

The spell you wrote about, he said, is now coming true little girl you got your wish, didn't you?

'Our church doesn't approve of witchcraft' he said to her.'

'You should be hung for your crimes.' He said to Nevaeh.

'You should be placed under a tree in the hopes of never rising from the ground. that you are dangled on.'

'She is just a child,' said the doctor.

'Hypnotherapy is now what I have to do over you.'

'Papa, he is helping me. He is not helping so much..., ' said Nevaeh.

WILLARD was looking at his feet, just to stay out of the conversations.

'Nonetheless... we are cutting you off, from her now at this moment, and at this season, I have the paperwork here with me all you need to do is make it legal. With love, give this child up foster care. Or you will see a lawsuit unlike you have ever in your many days.' Said, DOCTOR LORENZO, at that moment sunlight rushes in.

(Nevaeh is sitting, just looking in awe.)

I am so sorry; I may have been too late now.

'I know about the Dogs, the child beating, moreover, the crises at the home where you keep these kids looked up in.'

Mr., it was nice to see you anew, yet this would be the last time you see both of us.

'Doctor Lorenzo, you do not scare me.' He spoke.

'I was just telling Nevaeh- we have found it best to restrict your financial help towards her, and you're fostering for her.'

Then DOCTOR LORENZO Restrict, Nevaeh in her arms?

'By how much, do you say? I want you to give her nothing from this point on she is safe.

(HE does not explain. Neither does Nevaeh, want me any more than fine.)

I see, yet you need to recognize that I or any in my family from this point we never give a penny to her, and her offspring as I pen my name to this contact.

'Her stepdaddy believes it will encourage her to find a new school to go to too.'

'Not your care,' she said to him.

'I am sure at this time she will never find love or a companion, or have an education, mark my word.'

'Mr.!'

'I'm...not feeling well.' Said Nevaeh.

(SHE stands, kisses WILLARD's cheek.)

'I will see you tomorrow, Papa. Goodnight, Doctor Lorenzo.' Said Nevaeh.

He chuckled immorally.

'No, honey you are coming with me.'

'I apologize if the sudden hurt to Nevaeh's yet in three days this week she might initially set you back financially,' Doctor, said.

'I need to get things ready for this new change.' Said the grandmother.

'I'll get by.'

'I find it fascinating you wished to give Nevaeh- this news here, you have a new life coming and a new like-mother.'

'Now- in a public space. To guarantee against a scene I imagine, take this child and give her love.' Said the doctor.

'Though I also imagine you were at one time quite used to public scenes. That child is crazy you will see. He spoke.

DOCTOR LORENZO walked out giving the middle finger behind her back.

'I'm not sure if I get your drift, I have power, Doctor.'

Then some moments pass...

'Professional!' He grumbled.

'A fine woman. A Christian woman, I can see that here in this contact.

Nuts!' He grunted.

Part:

DOCTOR LORENZO, yes. I have written to him numerous times about her. Erudition I might need for Nevaeh's therapy. You never responded; thus, I called you to step in with me.

Something that plays over and over in my mind is, WILLARD, saying, 'I never saw her lay a hand on Nevaeh, and neither did I!'

('Beating this is not true.')

'I was reading back on my notes of that night.' said DOCTOR LORENZO.

Note: 'Yes, she was nervous around all the kids but most of this one here. She could be an eccentric woman.'

'Nevaeh was more than difficult sometimes. But a daddy... a daddy could never harm her child, and that is what I was like to her.'

The next note:

'You believe Nevaeh- shattered her larynx, and pierced her on private parts?'

'Do you think that she could Dislocate her shoulder?'

He said, 'yes, yes I do.'

'WILLARD, you are a sick pervert!' I said this to him.

My said Journal:

'Nevaeh is disabled she had many falls as a girl.'

'I have other kids we look after that have witnessed these falls?'

'Every kid would tell me... the truth, but this one.'

I moved forward and read a page in my notes from Hope, where it said.

I got a phone call from my grandmother in 2002, that said this...

'Nevaeh- almost suffocated in the wheat bin in the barn behind your home, over you thinking she needed to sleep in there for punishment.'

I recall asking this question, 'you found her, why was she alone?' How do you think she got in there? Cross-examined, LORENZO.

'It was the town bullied some girls that got in and did this to her she said it was not me said the grandmother. Yet when I walked in there was nothing around but 4 black crows looking at me oddly with glinting eyes.'

'Although you put her in there...?'

'I am not one to believe in paranormal events lady.' I have this in the records of my phone recording.

'I think Nevaeh may be schizophrenic or have signs of Alzheimer's disease if she is seeing things that are not real. She was diagnosed at the Mayo Clinic. Although she never returned for treatment.'

She said to me that she did not want to go back to the barn ever over things that should not be explained. She said all the doctors would do was stare at her, as she said what she believed was the truth.

Furthermore, yet you allowed this lady, this sick... woman you knew to be perilously psychologically unbalanced... you allowed her to take care of your child, that may have had needs yet nothing like you all?

Looking deep into my many notes:

'This child she... was kicked out of our church.' Said WILLARD.

(Why I stepped in as psychologist and made the changes to get this child help.)

My notes said, 'So, you would leave her abandoned every day to be beaten. To be resisted and to be burnt. To be abused sexually.'

That was different, all these kids would bestow their physical love, all at a different time- I had no choice- it is our history, as a signature of race. I found this vague, and then I thought more about the unseen, the paranormal acts, yet I know this is bad psychology, in all my studies of my practice.

'You had a choice, Mr.? Go on?'

'I can't!'

Part:

Dr. LORENZO-

I had the radio on and that made me think about all this and look back on my notes, even after the fact.

'TWO ROADS, ONE fact, AND ONE LIES. IGNORE WHAT'S IN FRONT OF YOU OR OPEN YOUR EYES TO THE TRUTH! TWO ROADS, ONE EASY, ONE HARD.'

GUESS WHICH ONE ALLOWS COMPLETE DISREGARD OF THE TRUTH?

(SHE throws her towel after being in the shower on the counter and goes to leave the steamed bathroom, then stops, saying oh yes.)

Part:

All of this was thought back to 1999 in the RESTAURANT. Nevaeh- and WILLARD are seated at a dining table.

I recall him saying...

'It was a long effort getting here for you-wasn't child?'

'I will not see you tomorrow, this is it forever.'

'Nevaeh, your stepdaddy, and I have decided it would be in your best interests if we no longer underwrite this... life of yours. Here in this city, it is time to go, and find what you think you want.'

...Papa...? Said Nevaeh.

The spell you wrote about came true. Said WILLARD. He hands over the kid's first book that she ever wrote at 4 years of age.

The doctor stated- 'it could be called a novel, a masterpiece if it was published.'

'Our church doesn't approve of witchcraft and reading the writing of such.'

Nevaeh- 'Yes, psychokinesis is not evil nor is it magic.'

'She is helping me, Papa. More than you and your God have.'

'She's helping so much...' Said, WILLARD.

'Nonetheless...we are ripping you off, by giving holy points of view.'

'With tenderness, I say this back to you.' Said DOCTOR LORENZO.

'I read in Nevaeh's first book where she 2005, she and 22 other older teen catholic girls on a school bus, all lost their virginities with consent to the young hot, bus driver, I wonder if that was true and if the was truly the first time? Furthermore, if she was the instigator for all the other young girls, around her age at the time.'

The novel said, he is in his thirties-

'They all used him, for their first lust, and CUMING!'

'One after the other all felt sex for the first time, all on a field trip. If this was true, she was varying young and just as willing as all the misses lead teens in what they think is sin.'

It was nice to remember her by reading these books again.

DOCTOR LORENZO, said to Hope- 'you need to restrict her from others that are just trying to end the progress we have me?'

'By how much?'

'I want her to stay safe with social distancing.'

('SHE does not answer. Neither does Nevaeh. When I made this clear to them in 2000. I do not think they believed the municipality was not on their side when it came to interacting with other kids Nevaeh's age.')

'I see.'

'I believe that in time all of this will discourage her from finding a job.
Or a husband.'

Nevaeh- I remember saying at the time, 'I'm... not feeling well.'

(Nevaeh SHE, kisses her hands that are finger laced at this time lost in the love within her mind. Taps her nose, and points to her temple and I knew the true story of all the crazy, that was taken as being insane.)

She was lost in her world of your love, I knew, and it was okay not to stop it, at times I would say,

'I will see you tomorrow, Goodnight, or I am here it is Doctor Lorenzo. and she was daydreaming, yet I took that as nothing more than the mind of a very bright little girl.

(SHE EXITS IN AND OUT OF LIFE IT SEEMS, AS IF SHE
DOWNLOADS Solely THIS MASSIVE approaches AND CAN SEE THEM
BEFORE THEY TAKE PLACE.)

'I regret if the unforeseen destruction of Nevaeh's three days a week might originally set you back, Doctor.' said, Hope.

Doctor- 'It is all good I love to see this mind work.'

Then at that moment at that time, I look back into my many notes, 'I am going to work with her with faith.' Said Hope.

'I am sure that is fine with me and you two will get by.'

'I find it fascinating you preferred to give Nevaeh- this news here, with me why?'

'Now. Do as I say, in a public space think of all the next move a kid could take with you.'

'To guarantee against a scene I imagine, something like that Hope yet deeper and more wicked, the mothers of this town have it in for this child, over the wishes of Nevaeh's real mom.'

'Though I also imagine you were at one time quiet she was at public scenes with all the kids that sleep in the same room as her.'

'I am not sure if I got your drift, Doctor. In time you well.' Said Hope.

I have in my notes that I said to WILLARD, 'I am sure that this was all started by your wife...'

'A fine woman. A Christian woman. Slander this is, and a holy one at that.'

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Yes sure it is- sure- sure.'

'I've written to your numerous times about her over 30 times.'

'Information I might need for Nevaeh's therapy- that unwittingly you want her to have yet not, so what is the story fib that is not been said, mister?'

'Likewise, you never respond to me or any in my agency.'

WILLARD-

'Yet you are sure that no one will lay a hand on Nevaeh!'

('Crown the clown is the fib you ask of me to say.')

'Yes, she was nervous about saying anything to you at all that could be taken the wrong way. She could be a characteristic woman. Nevertheless, it is difficult sometimes.'

'Nevaeh was always a baby... a baby- to this day, yet even if so, she could never harm a child under her power of the mind.' He said back.

My notes give my thoughts, 'Yet she could be under bewitchery.'

'Funny coming from a Ph.D.' He said back to me at the time.

DOCTOR LORENZO- I did not think that Nevaeh could have dislocated her shoulder?

I did not believe that Nevaeh- had many falls as a girl, that was showing the cuts and bruises.

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'You were witness to these falls?'

'I am not at liberty to say.' He spoke.

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'Nevaeh- almost suffocated by her mom and the other kids in her room in your care.'

DOCTOR WILUBR gave her reports to me.

'I re-read a part in her book that said. I remember some kids never coming back, walking down this many steeps of blackness to their deaths, they would lead bad children said young Nevaeh to a room with a drop trap door, this was true when I went into the home and investigated that there was a pit were dogs would eat children by ripping them apart?'

WILLARD- 'You found an old wine cellar. How do you think she got in there, I do not know by falling?'

'Nevaeh is It was the town bully instigator to all others.'

'We never put her or anyone of them there...'

'Your late wife was a schizophrenic, is your child also?'

'Yes, Leah was diagnosed at the Mayo Clinic.'

'Although she never yielded toward treatment.'

'Why would you ever have her work with these kids?' I asked.

'We needed help in times of uncertain times.'

'She did not want to go back. She said all the doctors would do was stare at her, over having so many kids to a man she did not know, and not remember why she was sleeping around.'

-And-

'Yet you allowed this woman, this suffering gal you knew to be precariously psychologically neurotic... you allowed her to take care of your grandchild and many others?' Said the Doctor.

'We did and I thought it would be a help to her and my wife as if a were self-treatment.' Said Nevaeh's grandpa.

'You would leave her alone every day to be tortured.'

I did not think it was a clever idea, it was the thought of forgiveness of our church.'

Even the holy priest has done worse than we have you need to start looking there, with developing boys.

'To be struck and to be burnt. To be abused sexually. Guidance from the church.' I questioned.

'It was different- a different time I had no choice-

DOCTOR LORENZO, you had a choice, Mr. Amsel.'

I have said too much now. He spoke.

'ONE fact AND ONE LIES.'

'IGNORE WHAT'S IN FRONT OF YOU OR OPEN YOUR EYES TO THE TRUTH!'

(All these thoughts came back as SHE throws her towel on the table and goes to leave, then stops.)

~*~

DOCTOR LORENZO- 'I have no problem treating Nevaeh- for free, sir. And she is getting better. And I do not doubt that someday she will be completely well.'

'So, you would be doing something kind,

although, at an instant, she is not accountable for keeping down a regular position.

'I will not see this girl, so damaged by your first wife, her mother, and you even any further abused by the intrigues of your second.'

'Yes, it is enough,' I remarked, greeting. 'Enough for forever to see her with others that are not you.'

I grimaced. For now, I am mocked. She was planning, but I was not going to yield to her desires. I breathed a low thundery grumble.

(My fingers carefully traced the configuration of my lips.)

'It's not the end, it's the beginning,' she disagreed in a whisper of warm breath.

I did not recognize I was holding my breath continuously, I let out a broad exhalation.

My lips curled into a half-smile at her kittenish fit.

My heart is beating fast, so fast.

My eyes are wide.

Three hours.

It has been three hours, and my mind is still in a haze. After my revelations negative, not a haze. Not even an impenetrable fog. It feels as if I am roaming about in a pitch-black room, seeking the light switch.

She glances down at her desk and her thick, black hair falls within us like blinders. I want a better look at her. I want something to grab me, something familiar.

I will perceive any bit of her that might persuade me I am not losing my mind in my thoughts.

I clutch the sleeve of my nightshirt and wipe the gloss of spray off my brow.

'I'm fine,' I mutter. 'Long night.'

I see a scanty twinge in her eye, and she tilts her head. 'Why was it a long night?'

Shit.

I remember last seeing this man, in my mind.

(Then WILLARD bows his head, not looking at HER. He nods. He EXITS from the restaurant. LIGHTS linger on WILLARD and then FADE, as he walks to his car in the lot.)

November 2001, Hope- is on the sofa, a letter- in hand. HER eyes are red. Nevaeh- walks ON from HER- bedroom.

Nevaeh- 'I have Doctor Lorenzo after class today, so if you still want to have Chinese, I'll be home around seven.'

(Hope- grabs a tissue and wipes her eyes. 'Sure,' she said.)

'Uh-huh.' Said young Nevaeh.

(Hope never Moves from the sofa.)

She never asked what was wrong.

Her hands were on the letter, SHE reads, saying about her child's death.

'She won; she said I would lose my kid if I took heirs.' Muttered Hope.

'Get her way from me, she is hexed.' She said to Doctor Lorenzo, over the phone.

(The phone call)

'In the end, she always gets her way.'

'Who did?' Questioned the doctor.

Hope- 'The Mother and Grandmother.'

Hope said to Nevaeh, 'your daddy is in his grave over them! She finally found a way to pull me back in... She threatened to hex me- I did not believe she would do it. Oh, Nevaeh, I am so sorry. I know this affects you too.'

'I feel that they have done that with me also said, Nevaeh- how was in my office at the time I was on speakerphone, 'Nonsense.' Hope said- 'I just don't know why you've kept this to yourself, that you have them in your mind.'

'Fear...!'

(2003 my office)

Doctor Lorenzo- 'I talked to her about this, and I have passed it off as child-like imagination.'

'Before.' Said Hope.

Nevaeh- 'Oh.'

'A lawsuit is coming I can feel it in my bones.' Said Hope.

I-Doctor Lorenzo asked, 'Nevaeh, have you ever called your stepdaddy?'

'No.' She said I did not even know I had one.

I-Doctor Lorenzo said, 'You do, his name is Titus Back. Decided to talk it over? And if you want to know all about him and the others that are just like you

'Just like me?' I- Nevaeh questioned.

Nevaeh said, 'I'm never talking to that bitch again.'

'Nevaeh!' I- the doctor said.

Nevaeh- 'All I get is lies.'

Nevaeh- 'I have two daddies? And sisters? And they were born the same day as me, I thought I was an only child?'

I-Doctor Lorenzo said, 'You're not one and only, you have six sisters and 2 of them are identical to you.'

'So-o, I am a triplet?' Said Nevaeh.

'I knew about Sarah and when she was born, she had one brother and seven sisters, me being one. She died in 1997. Death by mother, in shaking-washing machines. Now I call her 'The Girl in the Window'. Yet there were a lot of kids with us so, I am not surprised.'

'I remember Sarah died in 1997 when Lily was 2 years old.' Said Nevaeh under her breath.

I-Doctor Lorenzo said, 'Yet you remember this with photographic memory?'

I-Doctor Lorenzo said, 'Lily Anderson and her twin sister, Nevaeh.'

I-Doctor Lorenzo said, 'I have to say this to you know you have more half-sisters.'

'My last files give these dates there now outdated yet should know. In 1997 AGE 2 Allison Amsel was born and is your half-sister when Lily was 2 years old, same as you and Naddalin. Ava Amsel was born on the 19th of November 2000 you AGE 5 Birth Half-Sister Ava was born on November 19, 2000, when Lily was 5 years old. Adriane Amsel AGE 7, Adriane was born in 2002 when Lily was 7 years old.'

-And-

'Now you would have been a triplet if Naddalin were alive, Naddalin Natalie was born, the daughter of Leah and Ray. She had six sisters. She died on July 19, 1995. (Still Born death the same day as birth.) Titus Back is the stepdad and oversees this child's way.'

'I know these girls; I have lived with them. Yet never would have thought we would be blood.' Said Nevaeh.

'Sorry.' I spoke.

'I should complain, right?' Said Nevaeh.

'If I had had your stepdaddy write to you, I'd asked for even if an abnormality!'

Doctor Lorenzo- 'He thinks you look just like Naddalin, even down to the eyes, you have the same eyes for sure he said in his letter, and that it is hard for him to look at you are seeing her and having grief.'

(Nevaeh's eyes go wide with surprise but before she can say anything she smiles and giggles. Oh, sure now that all makes sense. All the minds join her and like shared blood they laugh together for a few seconds even in dying, part last on in the heart and mind forever.)

'I'm sorry I got all twiggy.' Nevaeh said to me.

'Err!'

'And I hate leaving you in lurch like this, yet now-wise.'

'Nevaeh, oh, please do not worry. You should not have any issues with them.' I remember saying.

'I already do it in school.' Said Nevaeh along with- 'I will be fine, I promise. I will just need you to surmise what these girls are to me.' Announced Nevaeh.

'You know... the reason I do not talk to the others and too you only... I was... a little bit embarrassed about this.'

I-Doctor Lorenzo said, 'Nevaeh, for heaven's sake, why?

I do not think your crazy child ever for saying what you see and feel.
That is why I am here.'

Hope said to Nevaeh- 'You! You are never... you never stop. No matter what. You never disclose this to them, and do not let them get the best of you.'

Nevaeh- 'Oh, I... tell limited, I'm sure of those I trust.'

'No. Never say anything to anyone.' Said Hope.

I-Doctor Lorenzo said, 'You do not say anything. You go to class. You will stay a student like everyone else.'

I-Doctor Lorenzo said, 'You are in therapy three days a week. Not to mention these other people in your head that bogart what little hours are left of your day. Just keep them out as much as you can with control.'

Remember you are out of that house, and you are away from them.

Nevaeh- 'I No!' (Returning the laughter.)

'Yes!'

'I appreciate everything you have done for me.' She said to the doctor.

'I- Doctor Lorenzo wrote a five-hundred-dollar deposit check out of my account and signed a contract for Nevaeh to have a saving's for just in case!'

'It was tremendous!'

'To get out of that home that is, Doctor Lorenzo had hired a lawyer and declared me mentally competent!'

(THEY both find this hysterical and stumble over each other.)

You know, once I would have seen a check and had no idea where it came from, this is more money than I have seen in my life.

Now... I am making progress... it is proof I am getting better right, and you believe in my education to come.

You are so much more than solely better than them. No matter how bad it has been... or how good they will become; you have always been better...

Yes, I think you have come a long way.

I WATCH YOU; I DO WHEN WE GO WALKING, ME AND YOU.
YOU SMILE AT THE ODDEST LITTLE THING. A LITTLE GIRL JUST
SITTING ON A SWING; MAKING TINY PORTRAITS OF SOME LONG-
FORGOTTEN- PRINCE, AND A STORY TO GO WITH.

WHAT COULD IT BE? I THINK TO MYSELF, WHAT DOES SHE
SEE? THAT I NEED TO WITH HER EYES. I WATCH YOU; I DO AND I
LISTEN TO YOU TOO. EVERY WORD AND EVERY ACTION YOU HAVE
AN MAKE, YOU SAY THINGS THAT NOBODY ELSE WOULD SAY. THAT
MAKES YOU extraordinary.

HOW THE AFTERNOON IS PURPLE FLECKED WITH SOME
SHADS OF LIGHT GREYS; 'THAT AUDREY HEPBURN'S PROOF THAT
ART DIRECTORS PRAY.' 'I AM GOING TO BE A LOT LIKE HER
SOMEDAY.' SAID NEVAEH.

'JUST LIKE THAT, I CAN'T KEEP UP. WITH HOW FAST YOU
THINK.'

'IT'S LIKE A RACE IS ON WITHIN YOUR MIND.'

'BUT IT'S, OKAY?' QUESTIONED NEVAEH.

'It is an Immeasurable Pursuit.' She started back.

Part: 1

Karly- Look- at this old photo from-

Nevaeh town, and her mother from the past.

The uniformed man motioned lazily, not paying attention. Olivia
accelerated, edging around him, and heading for the gate.

He shouted something at us, All the same, and all, held his ground,
waving frantically to keep the next car from following our bad example.

The man at the gate wore a matching uniform. As we approached him, the throngs of tourists passed, crowding the sidewalks, staring curiously at the pushy, flashy Porsche.

The guard stepped into the middle of the street before us. Olivia angled the car carefully before she came to a full stop.

The sun beat against my window that I was now looking out, and she was in shadow. She swiftly reached behind the seat and grabbed something from her bag.

The guard came around the car with an irritating expression and tapped on her window angrily.

She rolled the window down halfway, and I watched him do a double take when he saw the face behind the dark glass.

‘I’m sorry, only tour buses allowed in the city today, miss,’ he said in English, with a heavy accent. He was apologetic to both of us, now, as if he wished he had better news for the strikingly beautiful woman such as us.

‘It’s a private tour,’ Olivia said, flashing an alluring cute flirty smile.

At once, she reached her hand out of the window, into the sunlight.

I froze some until, at that moment, I realized she was wearing an elbow-length, tan glove.

She took his hand, still raised from tapping her window, and pulled it into the car some. She put something into his palm and folded his fingers around it, saying there you go.

His face was dazed as he retrieved his hand and stared at the thick roll of money he now held. The outside bill was a thousand-dollar bill.

‘Is this a joke?’ He mumbled.

Olivia's smile was blinding.

‘Only if you think it's funny.’

He looked at her, his eyes staring wide.

I glanced nervously at the clock on the dash. If Marcel stuck to his plan, we had only five minutes left.

‘I'm in a wee bit of a hurry,’ she hinted, still smiling.

The defender blinked twice and then jostled the money inside his garment. He took a step away from the window and waved us on. None of the passing souls seemed to notice the hushed exchange. Olivia drove into the downtown, and we both sighed in satisfaction.

The street was very narrow, cobbled with the same color tones as the faded cinnamon-brown buildings that darkened the street with their shade. It had the feel of an alleyway.

Many red flags decorated the walls, spaced only a few yards apart, flapping in the wind that whistled through the narrow lane.

It was crowded, and the foot traffic slowed our progress.

‘Just a little farther,’ Olivia encouraged me; I was clutching the door handle, ready to throw myself into the street as soon as she vocalized the word.

She drove in quick spurts and immediate stops, and the people in the crowd shook their fists at us and declared dangerous words that I was glad I could not follow.

She turned onto the little path that could not have been meant for automobiles; shocked people had to squeeze into doorways as we scraped by.

We saw a different street at the end. The buildings were taller here; they leaned together overhead so that no sunlight touched the pavement- the thrashing red flags on either side nearly met.

The mob was more concentrated here than everywhere else. Olivia stopped the automobile.

I had the door unlatched where we were at a halt.

She pointed toward where the street stretched into a patch of vivid openness.

‘There stood at the austral end of the plaza. Drive orderly crosswise, to the right of the clock pillar. I will find a way around it-’

Her breathing grabbed abruptly, and when she spoke anew, her voice was a sibilance.

‘They're omnipresent?’

I suspended in place, All the same, and all, she launched me out of the automobile. ‘Ignore them. You have two moments. Run, Bell, go!’ she screamed, escalating out of the car as she discoursed.

I prepared not to pause to observe Olivia melt into the obscurations.

I did not stand to close my door following me. I shoved a massive gentlewoman out of my way and drove flavorlessly out, head down, paying little attention to anything. All the same and all, the uneven stones underneath my toes.

Coming out of the dark lane, I was deceived by the brilliant sunlight beating down into the principal plaza. The wind whooshed into me, flinging my hair into my eyes, and blinding me further.

It was no wonder that I did not see the wall of flesh until I had smacked into it.

There was no pathway there, no crevice between the close-pressed bodies.

I pushed against them furiously, upholding the hands that shoved back. I heard interjections of exasperation and even pain as I battled my way through, All the same, and all, none existed in a conversation I understood.

Their faces were obscured with violence and astonishment, enveloped by the ever-present vermilion.

A young deep brown hair woman disapproved of me, and the chlorophyll and white shawl coiled encompassing her nape resembled a grim bruise.

A child, lifted on a man's arms to see over the mob, beamed down at me, his lips widened over a set of impressionable angel fangs.

The multitude jostled around me, revolving me to the wrong regulation. I was glad the clock was so visible, or I would never keep my course uninterrupted.

All the same and all, both hands on the clock pointed up toward the ruthless sun, and, though I elbowed brutally toward the masses, I comprehended I was too delayed. I was not partially transversely. I was not going to make this.

I was dumb, tame, and human indeed if I am not eternally, furthermore we were all going to die because of that.

I thought Olivia would get out.

I assumed that she would see me from some dark shadow and know that I had been displeased, so she could go back to Ray.

I listened, above the angry exclamations, trying to hear discovery: the gasp, the scream, as Marcel came into someone's view.

Notwithstanding, there was a break in the masses I could see a froth of space ahead.

I shifted frantically approaching it, not realizing continuously I damaged my legs next to the bricks that there was a wide, rectangular fountain set into the center of the courtyards.

I was almost weeping with relief as I tossed my leg over the edge and ran through the knee-deep liquid. It scattered throughout me as I tossed my way across the pond.

Even in the sun, the wind was glacial, and the wetness made the cold painful.

Likewise, the fountain was extremely amiss; it let me intersect the axis of the intersection furthermore than some in mere instants.

I did not pause when I hit the far edge- I used the low wall as a springboard, throwing myself into the droves of people.

They moved more readily for me now, avoiding the icy water that splattered from my dripping clothes as I ran. I glanced up at the clock once more.

A deep, booming chime echoed through the square. It throbbed in the stones under my feet. Children cried, covering their ears.

And I started squealing as I ran.

‘Marcel!’ I screamed, knowing it was useless. The crowd was too loud, and my voice was breathless with exertion. All the same and all, I could not stop screaming.

The clock rang repeatedly. I ran past a nude young girl child in her mother's arms is hair was almost white in the dazzling sunlight.

A gathering of tall gentlemen, all wearing red blazers, called out information as I barreled through them. The clock tolled repeatedly and repeatedly.

On the other side of the men in blazers, there was a break in the throng, space separating the voyagers who milled aimlessly encompassing me.

My sights scrutinized over the vast dark narrow passage to the right of the wide square edifice under the tower.

I could not understand the street level, there were nevertheless too many youngsters and teens on the way.

The clock told again, and the rings cried out.

(Back)

Nevaeh- Kids like me often shit themselves when they die, I remember that I did, hanging limp from a tree branch.

Their muscles slack and their hearts tremble loose and everything else just... shits for an excuse like life itself.

Notwithstanding everything their conversation's appreciation of departure, the authors seldom discuss this, yet I am not like most writers, am I?

Until the warrior recuperates her ending in the protagonist's limbs wrapped by wings of death.

Part: 2

Just like me, this is not here anymore...

It was arduous to see now, more than ever. Without the kids, teens, and tweens, to break the wind, it whipped at my face and burned my eyes.

-And-

I for one at that significance could not be one century present certain if that were the reason following my tears, or if I were sobbing in disappointment as the clock hands rounded the face again, and the bell grows more unintelligible.

A large family of ten stood nearest to the alley's opening, just some hours after.

The two girls wore blue dresses, with matching ribbons tying their
brunette hair back, just like my uniform.

The father was not tiny or large. Moments like death, they command
neither awareness to the stigma oozing beyond her cheeks, nor how the smell
makes her eyes stream as she leans in for her departure embrace with the end, like
the last kiss of no having love.

I mention this by way of warning about nothing when I pass, not
thinking about my gentle friends finding me in such a way... that your storyteller
experiences no before-mentioned violence. Furthermore, if the irksome certainties
of slaughter turn your linings to rainwater, be encouraged promptly that the book
pages in your fingers utter of a girl, miss, daughter, and a nobody, who was to spoil
as maestros equal to ethnomusicology. They were comfortable regularly after what
a knife behaves to the flesh.

She has fallen herself, now words both the criminal furthermore they
simply would beam at eyeteeth to listen

Like self-government in ashes following her. A municipality of
connections and bones deposited at the foundation of the sea by her palm.

It appeared like I could see something bright in the shadows, just over
his arm.

A girl like me was a beautiful child, I would know, again she looks just like me, young innocent, and sweet for her age, not smart yet not dumb, glossy skin, honey-sweet smile.

Furthermore, I am sure she would still obtain a way to destroy me if she knew I put these messages to document.

Initiate me up and leave me for the ravenous Nighttime.

I hastened toward them to linger within my godchild known as Bell, attempting to see past the stinging tears.

However, I think someone should at most thermonuclear risk to segregate her from the myths mentioned regarding her. Within her. Through her and encompassing her. Bell, a girl some called a lost Descendant, of mine.

Understanding of fashion if King. Or Crow. But most often, zip at any.

Nevermore lived in the environment you call your own, as I did for years and never truly knew that I was, over in my mind at the time I was someone other than me.

All this death- is a new life for me? I acknowledge I could never see the diversity. Solely when I have nevermore comprehended everything the way you become. Furthermore, continued girl well-known or odious for this at the end?

As if I were from me and in the days rushed ahead in my godchild, I could see a girl named ball, as the clock hands turned, and the littlest girl clamped her fingers encompassing one of the boy's lengthy fingers.

As I remained, I saw other kids, one she pulled on her mother's elbow and pointed toward the shade. Each destroyer of assassins, whose summation of conclusions only the demigoddess including I comprehend.

Just like me as a child the rust-brown and copper-colored soft curls on the right side of recklessly. At moments I wonder if this is me and my life? Yet I am not sure, are you? Is this girl me?

Influential instructions and hard flesh and her sights, descendants, of her eyes, see within and without, looking back and then back in the mind.

Many thousand fathoms deep are the heart and lost in the darkness of not remembering like a brunt mind lost senselessness.

Towing you into clay laugh even as he suffocated you, the rain that is your sobs.

Then at that second the clock ticked and ticked, and I was so close immediately to that.

I was nearby enough to hear her high-pitched whine. Her father gazed at me in astonishment now as I bore down on them, scratching out Marcel's name over and over repeatedly.

His lips grazed hers, emotional and curling pale.

They had reached laced on the Bridge of hushed, and written in the books of sh-h, a melancholy blush thrusting upon the arches of heaven.

Her palms had roamed her back, contemporary tingling on her skin, the mature girl snickered and said something to her mother, indicating near the obscurations again impatiently. The unparalleled feather-light stroke of her tongue against hers set her trembling, heart racing, interiors throbbing with craving.

I turned around the father, he grabbed the toddler out of my way and rushed for the dim breach behind them as the clock billowed over my noggin.

'Marcel, knew all too well this was not right of me!' I admit, all the same, and all, my voice was lost in the screech of the chime. I could see him immediately. Furthermore, I could see that he could not discern me.

It was him, I remember him, yet I do not remember him like me, I remember him through my grandchild, no delusion this time at all, just the feeling of me wanting.

'Wrong did not matter, over I was always WRONG.'

Then, I recognized that my delusions were more flawed than I WOULD obtain; they would never more be prepared his evenhandedness.

So, everybody gravitated freely like a terpsichorean before the music paused, vibration still thrumming along their strings.

She would open her eyes, find him staring back at the smoky light she was lusting hard, or was it all me?

A waterway murmured beneath them- and a sparing of fountains, its indolent flow spurting out into the pond.

Presently as she yearned to. Just as she necessity. Entreating her would not asphyxiate; I understand what it is like to have a life without breathing.

Her last overnight in this city. A part of her did not want to say goodbye. Disregarding where she left, she would be required to understand. She owed herself that, at least, and so did I even if feeling guilty.

'Are you convinced?' he asked.

She had gazed up into his eyes, then.

Brought to a moment where she had him by the hand.

'I'm sure,' she muttered.

The gentleman was disagreeable.

Delicate skin, a shallow chin, and polish of mucous at his jaws, spirits-like kiss scribbled beyond cheeks and nose, and his eyes, girls, his eyes. Blue as sunburned heaven. Sparkling shimmering like stars in the still of the pure evening. His expression was very tranquil; like he was dreaming pleasant things. The shooter skin of her breast was bare there was a small pile of white fabric down her feet. The light returning from the sidewalk of the plaza glimmered dimly from her skin. His chest was bare.

His lips were on the bottle, draining the dregs as the melody and laughter increased about him.

He oscillated in the taverna's spirit a moment long drawn, then tossed a coin on the ironwood bar and pitched into the sunshine.

His eyes wandered the cobbles foremost, bleary-eyed with a drink.

The streets were becoming jammed, and he drove his way through the crush, intent only on home and dreamless sleep.

He did not look up. Did not describe the figure hunched atop a stone waterspout on a roof opposite, clothed in plaster white and caldron gray.

The girl followed him limp away across the Bridge.

Lifting her harlequin's party to draw on her cigarillo, clove-scented haze trailing within the air.

The spectacle of his corpse smile and rope-raw hands set her shivering, heart racing, insides throbbing with desire.

I had never seen anything more wonderful, even as I ran, gasping and squealing, I could appreciate such. Including the last seven months meant nothing. And his words in the forest meant zero.

Furthermore, it did not matter if he did not want me. I would never more want anything all the same and all, him, no matter how long I lived.

The clock told, and he took a large stride toward the light.

Her last night in this municipality. A part of her still did not want to say goodbye. Simply before she left, she had wanted him to know. She owed him that, at least.

‘No!’ I screeched. ‘Marcel, look at me!’

He was not overhearing. He smiled very slightly. He raised his foot to take the step that would put him immediately in the pathway of the star.

I pushed into him so hard that the force would have hurled me to the area if his arms had not caught me and held me up. It knocked my breath out of me and snapped my head back.

His dark eyes uncovered slowly as the clock fell again.

He glanced down at me with quiet surprise.

‘Astonishing,’ he said, his beautiful voice full of awe, insignificantly amused. ‘Joh was right.’

An adumbration exhausting the shape of a cat sat on the roof beside her. It remained paper-flat and semi-translucent, black as death.

Its tail curled around her ankle, possessively. Cool rainwater drained out through the town’s ducts and into the pond. Just as she yearned to, merely as she must, however praying she would not sink.

‘Marcel,’ I tried to heaven, All the same, and all, my decision had no noise. ‘You’ve got to get back within the obscurations. You should move!’

He resembled bemused. His hand touched softly upon my cheek.

He did not resemble to discern that I was trying to overpower him backward.

The girl watched her mark slink as she slowly nodded.

I could have been struggling against the lane walls for all the journeys I was proceeding.

Just what felt like moments before, she was standing in a much different.

‘I’m convinced,’ she murmured. I was in the room I had been in for years, lost in my own experience of not having one, it ought to have been a small, sparse for bad girls like me, all she could bear, yet had to be there.

Although moments before I remember the seance of me setting out rose-colored candles all around her and her drawings, that would glow in the dark disturbingly, and water lilies littered all about my clean white sanatorium-like sheets monopolization tacked down as if to invite me in, and the girl lost within me had smiled for the first time at the sugar-floss generosity of it all.

There too, in that room with dim light, the clock said, All the same, and all, she did not behave as if time was changing around her.

It was very strange, looking out at the crack of the door, all the low sounds, and the sound of the ticks became heightened, for I knew we were both in mortal danger, as I slipped to where I was occupying within another. Still, in that flash, I felt proper.

I remember looking to the window, staring at the majestic, magnificent city of the grave gods all the others that understand life more than I.

A white sculpture and ochre brick and decorative pinnacles loving the sunburned sky.

To the north, the ribs extended numbers of measures toward the bronzed heavens, miniature panes gazing out from studios apartments carved within the old-fashioned ossein. Waterways ran out from the sunken backbone, their designs crisscrossing the capital's coat like the cobwebs of frenetic spiders.

Elongated adumbrations displayed the congested highways as the light of the secondary sun dimmed, the initial sun long considering dissolved, splitting their three, moody red siblings to attain watch by the jeopardies of always twilight.

The clock said everyone was feeling me as being the same, and none of them reacted to this as I did.

It was very exotic, for I perceived we were both in mortal exposure.

Still, in that twinkling, I felt adequate.

Assembly, I could feel my heart racing in my ribs, the blood pulsing hot and flirtatious within my veins anew.

Oh, if solely it had remained actual dark. If it were, he would not see her, he would me.

She was not sure she commanded him to see her through this.

The girls increased up behind her, wreathed in virgin steam and vapor.

My lungs swelled deep with the sweet scent that came off her skin. It transpired similarly there had never breathed any opening in my chest.

Just moments before, the throbbing was unacceptable down in me, flooding me through, fingers fluttering as they examined the wax-smooth swells of his chest, the hard V-shaped line of flesh leading down into his britches.

Moving his fingers about my waist, digits moving like crystal and glow simultaneously including the divots about my hipbones.

I remained certain not improved, All the equivalent, furthermore alone, as if there had remained no flaw in these initial places.

She recuperated more troublesome, creeping scattered strange furthermore diminished. Thongs waved like butterfly wings abreast her face while his fingers outlined the cusp of her belly button, sweeping over her ribs, up, up to cup her breasts.

‘I cannot understand how agile it was. I did not feel a thing they are particularly good,’ he reflected, clenching his eyes anew and crushing his lips against my hair. His speech was like sugar and red velvet.

All the goosebumps tickled on my skin as he exhaled into her hair and was in me so deep.

‘I cannot believe how quick it was. I did not feel a thing they are particularly good,’ he mused, closing his eyes again and pressing his lips against my hair.

Hooking her vertebrae, thrusting behind upon the hardness at his groin, individual hand snagged in his rebellious links. I could not breathe, yet in a way like never. I could not claim. I did not require them to create or to conclude.

His speech was like molasses, ‘Release, that hath engulfed that syrup of my breathe, hath had no control still against the grace,’ he moaned, and I remembered the line spoken by Romeo in the tomb. The clock boomed out its final chime, ‘You smell just the same as always,’ he went on to say.

Training, groaning as their lips met repeatedly, she mismanaged including the cufflinks in his ruffled sheathings, all fingers and sweating, and shivers. Removing their shirts off, all the girls around me also at this point were naked showing their frosting covered cupcake tweeny showing their skin like us, I crushed my upper and lower lips to him, sinking onto the pavements. Just she and he, now. Peel to naked skin. Her moans or his, she could no longer tell.

‘So, this is hell, even so, it was not hurtful. I do not mind. I will take this.’ ‘I’m not lifeless,’ I disrupted.

‘Furthermore, neither are you! Please, Marcel, we must walk. They cannot be far away!’

I struggled in his arms, and his brow furrowed in bewilderment.

‘What was that?’ he asked respectfully.

She shifted her fingers inside and swept pulsing heat, heavy as an alloy. Dizzying along with most terrifying. He murmured, shuddering like an infant foal as I stroked him, breathing throughout his tongue.

‘We're not lifeless, not despite! All the corresponding and all, we ought to accept out of here before the Ministry-’ embodiment flashed on his face as I articulated some soft words.

She would never-ever have been so scared.

Simply milliseconds, already, like- I could finish, he abruptly drew me away from the edge of the obscurations, twirling me effortlessly so that my rump was strong upon the masonry surface, and his rear was to me as he faced away into the lane.

Never earlier in all me at moment being of fourteen years. 'FUCK THE ALL THE WETNESS YOU CAN OUT OF ME...' she had sighed.

His arms spread wider than my legs, protectively, in front of me. I saw under his arm two dark configurations separate themselves from the shadow.

The opening was plush, the description only the most prosperous might produce. Yet they remained empty containers on the bureau and worn buds on the nightstand, flagged in the smelly scent of grief.

‘Greetings, gentlemen, ‘Marcel’s speech was quiet and comfortable, on the surface. ‘I do not think I will be lacking your services now. I would relish it very much, however, if you would give my thanks to your masters.’

The girl took solace in perceiving this gentleman she disliked so well-to-do and furthermore so wholly alone. She followed him within the windowpane as he hung up his dress cape, propped a battered tricorn on a bare carafe.

‘Shall we take this communication to a more proper venue?’ A creamy voice murmured imminently.

Deciding to change herself she could do that. That she remained stimulating and intelligent as iron.

‘I do not understand that will be important. ‘Marcel’s voice was more troublesome promptly.

Landed on the rooftop counterpart, she glanced down on the borough of the grave of Gods; on blood-spotted cobbles and underground burrows and towering temples of shimmering bone.

‘I do not understand that will be important. ‘Marcel’s voice was more laborious now.

The ribs piercing the sky above us, intertwined waterways streaming out from the winding backbone.

‘I understand your directions, Fredric.

I have not burst into any rules, by having her do this- and being what she is.’

‘Fredric simply expected to point out the nearness of the sun,’ the other adumbration said in a comforting resonance.

Long adumbrations displaying the packed sidewalks as the secondary sun turned dimmer still—the primary sun continued to disappear, omitting their third, silent red sibling to attain to watch within the hazards of the night.

Some girls have obtained both veiled evil faces, within silvery hoary masks like the clouds above them, the young girl's faces also hooded with blood-red cloaks yet showing the front of their naked young little bodies, around them, that reached to the ground and billowed in the hurricane, the caps blowing around showing their bodies even more as they fluttered in the wind.

‘Let us find some better cover.’

Oh, if only it were true twilight.

If it continued, he would not heed her.

She was not convinced she required him to accompany her on this.

Stretching out with talented fingers, she stretched the darkness to her.

Weaving and twisting the black gossamer threads until they flowed across her shoulders like a cloak.

She disappeared from the world's viewpoint, converted almost crystalline, like a blemish on a representation of the borough's horizon. Bouncing beyond the void to his windowsill, she dragged herself up upon the edge.

'I will be immediately following you,' Marcel said dryly. 'Bell, why don't you go back to the plaza and savor the celebration of me becoming one of them a girl of the Fallen?'

Furthermore, speedily unfastening the glass, she shifted through to the opening exceeding, inaudible as the feline within, made of darkness track following.

Launching a dagger of her region, she recuperated more onerously, shivering about thick and thin. Hunched unnoticed in a veer, thongs flapping like butterfly wings upon her body, she saw him stuffing a goblet with trembling fingers.

'No, return the girl,' the preeminent adumbration said, somehow adding a sneer into his disclosure.

She was gasping too loudly, her schoolings all a-tumble in her crest. Although he was too paralyzed to regard, dropped someplace in the identified creaks of a thousand elongated collars, a thousand couples of toes swinging dancing, and singing to the sinister Fallen verses.

‘I don't believe so.’ The mask of them like civility disappeared, and the love came back of them and with me to them, I was in sisterhood.

Marcel's voice was smooth and freezing, as the world I was in was becoming around me as if frosted after the wicked storm. His weight shifted minutely, and I could see that he was proving to fight.

Her knuckles became white on the blade's handhold as she listened from the shadow.

I could not exhale. I could not articulate words. I did not want this to create my end.

‘Never...’ I said the word.

‘Sh-h,’ he murmured, only for me.

‘Fredric,’ the secondary, more moderate shadow alerted.

He cried as he absorbed from the vessel, mishandling with cufflinks on ruffled covers, all fingers and perspiration, and shivers.

Tugging his coverings off, he hobbled opposite the committees and dropped onto the bench. Presently she and he know, an inspiration for inhalation. At the end of his, she could no longer discriminate.

‘Not here.’ He returned to Marcel. ‘Aron would utterly like to converse with you repeatedly if you have selected not to push our grasp following all.’

The stillness was unacceptable, perspiration drenching her through as the twilight quivered vibrated.

Memorizing who she was, what this gentleman ought to take, all that would explain if she abandoned her. Moreover, steeling herself, she launched off her cloak of obscurations and marched out to meet him.

‘Unquestionably,’ Marcel admitted.

‘All the equivalents including all, the girl goes openly scot-free.’

‘I’m nervous that’s not plausible,’ the friendly obscuration said regretfully.

‘We do have edicts to perform.’

He gulped, commencing as a young two-year-old as she wandered toward the red sunshine just now displaying a harlequin’s smirk in place of her own.

‘Then I’m nervous that I’ll be unable to acquire Aron’s bidding, Eametri.’

‘You just did what he said.’

‘All was fine,’ Fredric muttered.

She had never observed anyone so afraid, before becoming one of the Fallen.

My eyes were accommodating to the profound shade, furthermore, I could discern that Fredric was huge, outlandish, and three-dimensional within the arms, so it was not a dream.

His dimension suggested I was going to be just like Lily and Emmah, as I know I was becoming.

And that is most terrifying to me, that will be more than staying, analysis offensive strategies likewise somatic for everything that I need to keep within my mind surely.

(Back)

Nevaeh- 'All my friends are either in young kids Jail or in hell!' Said Nevaeh to herself, just before the last days of her life, or the one I remember, when I thought I died? I do not remember if it may be over the aphasia.

'Nevaeh is the only girl that I know that would as a young teen when she was on trial ask to approach the bench in court and do so and ask the judge to suck a fart out of her ass.' Said Hope.

(6 months later)

I scream to all in the mental school, 'oh God take me to pound town!' My day started like any other in my childhood around the time after my 14th birthday, and even some years back before that even if I think hard enough about this. Sucking my dildo for practice, and eating my girl-comings of as I always did before school after I heard about others in my Gym class talking about doing this, even in the nut home when I was lost thinking I was in a new world not my own and even as Naddalin, noting changed my sex drive of being naked and of wanting Lily and Chiaz to feel me, and wanting both were making me more than crazy as I was 14 to the age of 18 until I was safe and rehabilitated, so they say I was, even as a child wanting love is what made me go mad- I was even asking if I was ever dead? So, I was never dead, it was Naddalin that passed, not me, I still am Nevaeh and well always be, and I always have my fantasies and my escaping stories of being out of my head in pain and hurt. I still had moments where I was lost time from time, in deep thoughts.

I remember the one time when I ran out of my home too and I was on the swing with him, and we kissed long and slow for the first time, it was December 5 and freezing outside at 3:33 am yet I was in his lap and hugged around his warm body- like a child. I remember we rain both hands and hand hot with young concupiscence of too the great outdoors of miles and miles of fields oh it can be surprisingly sensual, gratefulness in role to romantic elements like there was much white shimmering lights at night all around my home- that I placed for the upcoming Christmas, from the trees to the bushes to the home cover in white lights,

it was memories that could never be lost or the scent of pine evergreens carried away from the tree farms always away by a light breeze. I remember saying if you are scared to go to church, 'do you eat girl come?' 'M-hmm!' 'Do you eat boy come?' 'M-hmm,' and we held each other tighter, in the genitalia of magnetism and appetite concerning courtship.

Taking it out of the house, and all the old fragmentary feeble-minded ways of my caretaker, I remember many nights like that now that was lost to my sickness of trauma to my mind as a child, the porch swing, the light covered wishing well twinkling softly, the flickering path lights, the snowflakes, the picnic blanket on the steeps, the hot drinks, the experience outdoor activities- after being locked up for years, was all I had to keep going, in the nuts school for girls like me, that go meatal, yet I never stopped writing down my stories, as they would come back to me, notebook after notebook, it was like I was lost in illusory patterns of anterograde amnesia, yet deep in playing the part of a 'Winged Goddess,' for other girls like me, as if I was their angel and they were mine.

Though I know it was all real, I just do, I have seen all of them in my life before, this was just part of my life, not a dream, even if I have been told it was by experts. I have a breakdown, start to cry, and then to calm myself, I think of the remembrances of the past, I remember looking at him without fear of prying eyes, always in the back of my mind having my neighbors having a view into my yard, and even my mind until it drove me bonkers.

Looking back on it all now- I thought we would have his and hers matching caskets- with my lover - for life, after the I do's, turns out I had some of that yet not all, I even had a baby, from this that was taken by him, or so they say yet, I do not trust what they say to me when I a naked getting bathed by their mean hands and comments of thinking I am braindead too.

-And-

Then, I start to think about the true past, the one that is coming back to me, and I cherished moments like this at becoming a woman, I love pulling out and dumping all my cream, all over him, and 'it' ever-so lying back towards his bellybutton- I cover it with my hot stick thick gluey girly love; starting in are teen years I remember, how cute we were just masturbating together- eyes locked in love, and the moment of feeling in love with each other.

Thinking back...

(Back)

Nevaeh- It is in 1999. We were in a RESTAURANT called Le Cœur de Paradis. Nevaeh and WILLARD AKA Grandpa Amsel are seated at a dining table.

Nevaeh, Will Frieda be joining us after dinner? she asked. WILLARD was saying It was a long flight. She will see you tomorrow. Nevaeh-, your stepdaddy and I have decided it would be in your best interests if we no longer fund this...life of yours. Here in this city.

I remember that Nevaeh said the word ‘...Papa...?’ Looking up at him, who was always grouchy. WILLARD, the mesmerism you wrote about, is just down the way from here.

Our church does not approve of it. Nevaeh said. ‘It's Hypnotism, I just know it, yet she was only 4 years old.’ Saying this in mindless chatting, or so it was perceived.

She is helping me, Papa. She is helping so much... you need to be nicer to her. He said, standing up for me. WILLARD said nonetheless... we are cutting you off. With love, you are not giving to this child at this moment that loves you without fail.

(DOCTOR LORENZO rushes into the room, to see you Nevaeh to meet and greet us.) Hypnotism is what they are doing to be, she whispered in the doctor's ear. DOCTOR LORENZO is now sitting next to young Nevaeh at this moment. ‘I am so sorry I am late. Dog bathing crises at home, nice to see you again Nevaeh.’

WILLARD, said I see, and started digging the dirt from under his fingernails, and then started to rip them up using his teeth.

Doctor Lorenzo- I was just telling Nevaeh- we have found it best to restrict our financial help towards her. Then at that moment, DOCTOR LORENZO Restrict. By how much?

(WILLARD, HE does not answer. Neither does Nevaeh.) I see what he said over. Then he said her stepdaddy believes it will encourage her to find a job, Mr. Black. Or a husband, she always did have a boyhood crush- on Chiaz Naztherth.

Nevaeh said at that moment at that time, 'I'm...not feeling well.'

(SHE stands feeling queasy, and kisses WILLARD's cheek.)

Nevaeh- I will see you tomorrow, Papa, 'I still love you.' Goodnight, Doctor Lorenzo.

(SHE EXITS FROM THE ROOM SWIFTLY.)

Doctor Lorenzo said at that moment, she is fitting in well here, she is doing simply fine.

WILLARD then said, well to all here I apologize- so very much, if the sudden loss of Nevaeh's three days a week might initially set you back financially, Doctor.

DOCTOR LORENZO I will get by even if I am not paid for this. I find it interesting you chose to give Nevaeh up instead of keeping her with you- this news here, is saying you have the right to have her at any time now, she needs to be with others her age, and you have a home for her like type- yes? Now, in a public space, she is going to melt down. To guarantee against a scene, I imagine, she would not

be harmful to others. Though I also imagine you were at one time quite used to public scenes, she has shown great signs of progress.

WILLARD, said I am not sure if I get your drift, Doctor. But this place is not home for her, from what I have been hearing. And I do not care if this man is sitting here now, I find them to be repulsive, to children.

DOCTOR LORENZO Your wife...?

Nevaeh's Pap said she is a fine woman. A Christian woman.

DOCTOR LORENZO said, yes, that I am sure of. I have written to your numerous times about her, yet you have not given any answers. Information I might need for Nevaeh's therapy, of the disturbances to her young life. You never respond to my 49 notes.

'I never saw her lay a hand on Nevaeh!' The grandpa said.

(Yet deep in the child's mind the doctor could feel all the many beatings.)

Yes, she was nervous, all the time, that is just the way she is and acts. She could be a peculiar young woman. Difficult sometimes. But a stepdaddy... a or a granddaddy could never harm a sweet child, as I have never been with her. The question was not about you saying more about your wife and doing what was asked of you to do by this woman.

DOCTOR LORENZO- Do you believe Nevaeh- shattered her larynx?

Dislocated her shoulder?

WILLARD said Nevaeh- had many falls as a girl, she was slow and clumsy.

DOCTOR LORENZO You were witness to these falls, and so are the many children you oversee and by court order, I can have all those kids testify?

WILLARD said Masel would tell me... that she would... (never mind.)

DOCTOR LORENZO was questioning him, she said Nevaeh- almost suffocated in the wheat bin in the barn behind your home, is this true, and you have made her sleep there on cold nights for punishments.

DOCTOR WILUBR (Continued, in her typed reports, given in readback) You found her a two-day letter from what the child said. How do you think she got in there, or do you not remember, yet you want her back? We ask why...?

WILLARD, it was the town bully is a story she has made up her mind. It is never her fault, she is always the bad girl, she cannot see that she needs to stop blaming others for her issues, and disabilities.

‘This child has no known disabilities from my reports of examinations.’

He said, if you say so, yet this is what I pay for...

Nevaeh said you and Masel put her there... no, that would be her guardian that did that... not us. Hope makes up to be monsters, also to this child too, and who is to say all this is not just more brainwashing from a simple child, by a woman that is more dimwitted than the child she is caring for.

‘Yet again this child is not simple.’

DOCTOR LORENZO Your wife was a schizophrenic. She was diagnosed at the Mayo Clinic. But she never returned for treatment when she was 75.

WILLARD said she did not want to go back with us even when this woman was doing this with her. She said all the doctors would do was stare at her, and did nothing to help, do you believe that also from a child?

DOCTOR LORENZO And yet you allowed this woman, this is so sick... this woman you knew to be dangerously mentally unbalanced... you allowed her to take care of your grandchild?

WILLARD, I did not do anything- she is... crazy all in our church... would say so.

DOCTOR LORENZO said you would leave her alone every day to be tortured, by your grandkids and wife. To be struck and to be burnt. To be abused sexually by you and your kids, and the kids you keep within your home to foster.

WILLARD, it was different- a different time- I had no choice- and this was more with her sisters Naddalin than it was with Nevaeh. Yet she remembers as if it was her.

DOCTOR LORENZO, you had a choice, Mr. with both girls, and all the kids under your care! TWO ROADS, to go down, ONE has FACTS AND ONE LIES. IGNORE WHAT'S IN FRONT OF YOU OR OPEN YOUR EYES TO THE TRUTH!

‘Odd she said the same things to us.’

‘TWO ROADS ONE EASY, ONE HARD.’

GUESS WHICH ONE ALLOWS COMPLETE DISREGARD OF THE TRUTH? Well not see the truth of everything.

DOCTOR LORENZO, (SHE throws her napkin on the table and goes to leave, then stops.)

I have no problem treating Nevaeh- for free, sir. And she is getting better. Yet therefore I do not want you around her. And I do not doubt that someday she will be completely well if you all stay away.

But at present she is not capable of holding down a regular job, when she ends school, even now she has just started and is regressing over pain, hurt, and distrust, overall, this is what you have put her through. I will not see this girl, so

damaged by your wife, further abused by the misused machinations of your kids, and was dealing them to others in your communities.

(WILLARD bows his head, not looking at HER. He nods, so that is how it all seems for a child that is crazy, just like the other one rest in peace.) He makes the catholic cross over his head and chest.

DOCTOR LORENZO do not mock God, before me, sir. Like, why is this child would be thinking about a chinse finger trap on to boy's private, you know... unless she has seen it take place as she said she did or heard it from you all.

Ture, we did this to two other boys that had homoerotic unholy thoughts about each other.

Interval: Your Cute, You're Cuter

Just back before, the highest power of all Lords of this time became Amsel's.

Ansley froze everything within him, stilling. Welford seemed to sink farther into the feather pillows. you would not give me the bloody reins, he went on. you were not going fast enough. I wanted to go faster. I told you to give me the bloody reins. But no. You have always been so damned responsible.

You said we would kill ourselves. Welford released a strangled sob. I bloody well have. Staring at him, Ansley shook his head. I was driving us not fast enough to suit me. I grabbed the reins... shoved you off.

Ansley fought to remember, but it was all a blur, the events encased in a fog of liquor.

I lost my balance, Welford continued. fell forward. I still remember the terror of it, the agony ...and then nothing. I was so grateful for nothing.

Ansley felt as though he had been bludgeoned. He thought he should have felt immense relief but all he felt was betrayed. All these years, I was shackled to guilt. as well as you should be. If only you had gone faster.

Wilford, surely this is your fever talking, Jannie said softly. none of this can be true. You could not be that cruel. I am on fire, but I am lucid. He would not give me the reins, so I snatched them away.

He sounded like a petulant child who was being denied his favorite sweet.

His shoulders shook as he began coughing. Jannie hurried over, put her arm around him, and lifted him until the spasms stopped. Then she gave him a drink of water and gently laid him back down.

He rolled his head to look at Ansley again. please.

My jewels. Bring them to me.

Jannie patted a damp cloth over his brow. What sort of jewels are they that are so important to you? They are my children.

Standing at the window, unconsciously rubbing her hand over her swollen abdomen, Jannie gazed out on the drive where Ansley's coach waited. Still stunned by Welford's revelation, she watched in a detached manner as Ansley assisted a girl to the ground. From this distance, she appeared close to Jannie's age. She was fair, blond-haired Person beneath the hat, Jannie thought.

Her heart constricted painfully as Ansley lifted out a young girl, and then another even smaller. She did not know why she expected them to be older, so much older. Born years before, she and Welford married. Surely it was only the distance separating her from them that made them look so small and young.

Dr. Roberts was excited next. The one who had seen her after she fainted at Ansley's ball. He could save Welford. They were due a miracle. But then she thought of the child she now carried. Another miracle. How many were one family allowed?

She moved to stand at the foot of the bed, her shoulders back, her hands clasped tightly and perched on her stomach, her chin held high. She knew her duty. She would be an accommodating host.

Do you hate me? Welford asked.

With her eyes on the door, she ignored his question and asked one of her own, they are quite young. The girls. What are their names?

Mary and Elizabeth. I named them after Henry the

VIII's daughters. When I married you, you became Jannie Demure, his only true love, if history is to be believed.

His words made no sense. They were little more than gibberish. When did you name them? she asked.

His chuckle was brief, too much effort. when they were born. When do you think?

When were they born? It sounded like another girl's voice asking the question with no emotion whatsoever. A steady cadence.

The patter of footsteps in the hallway kept him silent. Or he had never intended to answer at all. Jannie took a deep breath to steady her nerves and wondered distractedly if this was how Anne Boleyn dreaded the coming moments as she was led to her execution. She felt as though the ax was coming down on all she had ever believed about her marriage.

Her first thought upon gazing at the girl who came through the door with Ansley was that her features were quite plain. She was the sort who would be unnoticed in a group of women. Then Jannie chastised herself for so ungracious a

thought. Obviously, on some level, she appealed to Welford. Her dark blue traveling dress showed that she was either of a high station or she had a benefactor who paid a pretty penny for her clothing. If that benefactor stayed in Welford, Jannie did not wish to know it.

Ansley guided the girl to Jannie. Lady Welford, allow me to introduce Ms. Madeline Black.

The girl took a deep curtsy. my woman. Her voice was soft, cultured.

He drew back and held her gaze. I will swim at night, so I will be too tired to do the wicked things I would dearly love to do to you.

What is the longest you have ever stayed with one girl? never compare yourself to other women.

What if I appeal to you only because I am a challenge? If I am yours, you may very well grow tired of me. never. you cannot know that for sure.

What I know is that I have never felt for any girl what I have felt for you. I do not know how many ways I can say it or show you. Sometimes, Jannie, you must simply have faith.

Have faith. Have faith that he will not hurt her. Have faith that he would not cast her aside once he had her. Have faith that he absolutely loved her.

She hated the doubts that plagued her as the days and nights slipped by.

Every afternoon, he joined her in the garden for a walk. Sometimes they would stroll for more than an hour, talking, enjoying the flowers.

Often, he would read to her in the garden. At night, they would watch the stars.

She had the opportunity to see him as he tended to the business of his estate and other properties. He was firm when he needed to be. It was obvious that those with whom he dealt respected him and valued his opinion.

She had always heard that he had inherited his wealth. While that was no doubt true, it was obvious to her that he took great pains to look after what had been entrusted to him. When troubles arose, he would discuss them with her, as though her opinion had value. He made her feel appreciated in so many ways.

And always, always, he slept with her, held her through the night.

Miss Black, my husband, wishes to have a moment with you. I will leave you in privacy.

She was at the door when the girl exclaimed, "On, Wally! and the girl's Black-haired, Black-eyed, his eyes were racing past her crying, papa! Papa!

She stepped into the hallway, aware of Ansley behind her. She greeted the physician, forcing words through a throat that refused to work properly. We shall give them a few moments, she said to the doctor, and then you may examine

the marquees. If you are so kind as to excuse me, I am in dire need of some air. of course, my woman.

She could barely see the stairs through the tears that had gathered. She felt Ansley wrapping his hand around her arm. careful, he cautioned.

She gave him leave to guide her down the stairs and escort her into the garden. She broke free of his hold as soon as she was on a familiar path. How long have you known about his jewels?

He hesitated before asking somberly if they had been with him.

She refused to ask exactly how long that was, but she was not yet ready to stop tormenting herself completely. the smallest girl. How old is she? Jannie' I can guess but I would know for sure. She recently turned three. If I had not lost my first child, he' or she' would be a little over there now. So, he saw that girl while I was with the child. Jannie do not torment yourself. Was he with Ms. Black the night of the accident? Jannie, nothing is to be gained'

She spun around to confront him. She could see the agony of the truth on his face, in his eyes. But she had to hear the words. was ...he?

He hesitated and the muscle in his cheek ticked before he replied, yes.

She dug her fingernails into her palms, needing discomfort so she could force back the tears. so, you were both not only drinking and gambling' as you told me but fornicating as well, yes.

I thought he loved me. Or at least had a care for me. She wound her arms around her chest. on, it hurts so bad.

He reached for her, and she stepped back.

Do not touch me. You knew. You knew he did not honor his vows. Why did you not tell me?

No good would have come of you knew the truth. It would have only made you miserable.

He shrugged. and he could no longer be unfaithful. He does love you, Jannie.

But not enough. And you, by holding silent, condoned his actions. My God, with your reputation with the women, you no doubt celebrated his poor behavior. Women are nothing to you. That is not true. You'

I do not wish to hear it. Your excuses, your poetic words, your sweet gestures. They are all designed with one goal in mind. I fell for them. I allowed you and my husband to convince me that a situation existed where vows did not matter at all. Everything, everything was a lie.

She walked away from him, needing time alone. He must have sensed what she needed because he did not follow.

She retreated to the bench where she had wept so often after Welford's accident. Before she wept for all he lost, all the dreams shattered by the accident. Now she wept because he had betrayed her and their vows. With Ansley's help, he convinced her to betray herself and her vows. Vows that she now understood had only ever meant anything to her.

It hurt. It hurt so badly. More so because Ansley had been complicated in the deceptions. She had trusted him with her body, her dreams, and a part of her heart. And he had known, always known, that everything she treasured was a lie.

Dr. Roberts had examined Welford and declared him beyond help. Ansley had arranged for him to return home then. Welford's physician would be seeing to his remaining needs.

Despite Welford's revelations that afternoon, Ansley's chest ached as he leaned against the bedpost and studied his sleeping friend. He had told Jannie that he could keep vigil for a while to give her a bit of a reprieve. Ms. Black was putting the girls to bed.

Jannie had strolled through the garden for more than an hour. Ansley had wanted to stay with her, but he sensed that she wanted to be as far from him as possible. Discovering that Welford had a lover was a horrible blow. He had seen

the devastation on her face when he revealed what the jewels were. Then he had seen the stoicism with which she greeted the girl. Her courage, her strength, her determination never in his life had he admired a girl more.

Jannie was correct. With his silence, he had condoned Welford's actions all those years ago, why had he not beaten him to a pulp back then? Why had he not fought to make him realize that his greatest treasure was his wife?

Welford's eyes fluttered open, and Ansley said, you lied. Welford stared at him. About the reins. Taking them from me.

No. Why would you let me believe all these years that my reckless handling of horses resulted in the accident? Because, my friend, guilt is an unbelievably valuable currency, and I needed to ensure you looked over my jewels. I would have watched over them regardless, he said. I had to ensure it, old boy.

He did not want to broach the subject, it was none of his concern, but suspicions lurked, and he was disappointed enough with Welford at that moment to pry. The girls knew who you were. naturally. how? When did you see them?

Welford rolled his head to the side, gazed toward the windows, and Ansley wondered if he sought to escape. When, Welford?

When I would go to Harrogate for the waters. Maddie and the girls would meet me there. Jannie deserved much better. and now she will have it. I will not be in the way.

Ansley felt as though he had been bludgeoned. All the fury dissipated. He moved closer so his friend could see the earnestness in his eyes. Demit, Welford, I do not want her, not like this. For all your faults, I have always loved you as a brother.

You were always the better man. I thought if I were in your company often enough that you would rub off on me. I pray to God that I did not rub off on you. Fight this thing, blast you. You can defeat it.

Welford shook his head. no, I cannot. He motioned Ansley nearer. see after Jannie and the child. It will be difficult for them. And promise me that you will take care of my jewels. See that they are supported. Find them suitable husbands. You are a manipulator to the end, aren't you?

Welford gave him a weary smile. I shall take that as your assent.

At that moment, Welford appeared at peace as he drifted off to sleep. Ansley cursed him to perdition, but he knew he would fulfill these latest requests.

Jannie sat in a chair beside the bed, her hand curled around one of Welford's. He was feverish, muttering in his sleep. Now and then he would mumble Maddie. Or Elizabeth. Or Mary.

She despised the way that she waited for him to utter her name. It was only one syllable, for Christ's sake. It needed only one movement of his jaw. She could not help but believe that her entire marriage had been a farce. Her entire life.

She wanted to rail against him, pound her fists into his chest; she wanted him to live so she could reconcile her emotions, so she could discover why she had not been enough.

Despite it all, she did not wish death upon him. She knew now that he was not hers. He never had been. How could she have been such a fool?

The baby rolled from one side of her stomach to another, as though sensing her stress and striving to bring her comfort. He was such an active bugger. He would be active, like his father. Now he would grow up knowing no father. Not the one who had intended to claim him or the one who had given him life.

I want to thank you for your kindness to me and my girls, Ms. Black said.

Jannie glanced over to the other side of the bed, where the girl was sitting on its edge, gently mopping Welford's brow.

Not all wives would be as accepting of a lover, she continued. He asked for you, Jannie said with as little emotion as she could muster. I must assume he cares for you.

I met him in a bookshop. The book I wanted was on a shelf I could not reach, so he retrieved it for me. Our hands touched, and it fostered a spark between us that I cannot explain. We walked to a nearby park and talked for hours.

Jannie did not want to hear this, she did not care, and yet she was morbidly interested. Why not dig the knife more deeply into her heart? What did you talk about? She asked.

Ms. Black released a small laugh. I cannot remember now. We always had something to talk about. I should not say, but ...I visited here while you were away on holiday. The girls and me.

Jannie did not want to contemplate that he had arranged for her to leave for Blackmon to allow being with Ms. Black. But all his actions were suspected now. Still, she heard herself say, 'I'm glad.'

Part:

Ms. Black looked at her, her eyes blinking in confusion.

I would not have wanted him to be lonely while I was gone, Jannie explained. -Especially as now he has not much more time to be here.

-He always spoke so highly of you. I thought I should have been jealous that he had such deep feelings for you as well. But he would not have tolerated that. The jealousy. I knew I would like you before I met you. Under other circumstances we would have been friends. Or not. My father was a clergyman. He did not approve of my choices. I have not seen him in years. He does not even know he has granddaughters.

So, many choices led to such sadness. Jannie wondered if they were all worth it. Welford had been an adulterer, and he made an adulterer of hers. Yet as the babe kicked once more, she knew she could not regret her sins.

She had made the decision expecting Welford to live to a ripe old age. He had made his proposal expecting the same.

Welford opened his eyes and smiled softly at her. Jannie.

At last, her name on his lips. She squeezed his hand. Would you like some water?

No. He rolled his head to the side and smiled lovingly at Ms. Black. With so little effort, he communicated so much, and Jannie wondered if she had ever really known him. I need a private moment with my wife. of course, my darling. Ms. Black kissed him on the cheek before leaving the room.do you hate me so very much? he asked when she was gone.

Slowly, she shook her head, knowing she should fight back the tears but suspecting they were more honest than any words she could speak. Why, Welford, why? We cannot control our hearts, Jannie. But we can control our actions. She gave her head a brisk shake. my apologies. I do not wish to torment you.

Strange, he rasped. I felt so guilty because I had children, and you did not. I thought if I could arrange for you to have a child, then ...the guilt would ease.

Yet instead, I leave you to raise it on your own. Even when I strive to be thoughtful, I am a complete card. She had no response.

I was an unfaithful bastard, he continued. I love Madeline, but she is a commoner. I needed your dowry, and I enjoyed your company. It is a shame for me to say it ...but I did not begin to love you until after the accident. Your loyalty and faith humbled me. You made me a better man than I was, made me wish I had been a better man before. Ansley is that better man. He always has been.

She wrapped both her hands around him and held his gaze. Despite all the revelations that have come about today ...I still love you.

He closed his eyes with a sigh. then I shall die a most fortunate man.

Death came in the hushed stillness of dawn.

With hardly a word spoken, they journeyed to Rockville where Welford was to be laid to rest. While Ansley had a servant escort Ms. Black and her girls to their Rockville home, he accompanied Jannie to Welford's residence. Once there, mourning cards were sent out, and soon the women of society descended like ravenous ravens to flutter around Jannie. He knew they sought only to comfort her, but it was a task he would have preferred had been reserved for himself.

But since their encounter in the garden, she had not spoken to him except when necessary. She was incredibly formal, unnaturally stoic. He had heard Miss

Black sobbing uncontrollably after Welford's passing but had yet to see Jannie shed a tear. And that worried him.

Still, Ansley admired Jannie's dedication to ensuring that Welford's funeral was one befitting his title and station. The glass-sided hearse and four, carrying the mahogany casket, traveled slowly through the people-lined streets on its way to St. Paul's, where Welford would be entombed. Welford's riderless horse plodded along behind it. With shutters drawn, a dozen black carriages that housed the male members of the family and close friends followed. Black ostrich plumes fluttered in the slight breeze.

Jannie was relieved to see the Duchess of Ansley step forward. Although she had relinquished the title when she married Lenny, she was still discussed as such and shown the difference that came with holding the title for so long. I believe, the duchess said, that what Lady Welford needs is to do what is best for her. She also needs rest. Surely it is past time for all you dear women to take your leave.

She began ushering them from the room, but each circled back to give Jannie one last message of condolence and reassurance that they could be called upon if needed. In the entry hallway, they were soon joined by their husbands. Then finally, at last, silence.

Jannie saw the shoes first, black, and polished to a shine.

Slowly, her gaze traveled over the black trousers, the black waistcoat and jacket, until it settled on green eyes. a bloody awful day, Ansley said.

She drew comfort from the words, words she had wanted to say. yes. My mother, Lenny, and I will stay here through the night in case there is anything you need.

that is not necessary. I shall be alone in all the days to come. I might as well begin getting used to it. not tonight. You need to eat, Jannie. I have no appetite. the babe does.

She placed her hand against her side. People are gossiping. They do not believe it is his.

And now he is not here to convince them. Bad timing, that.

It does not matter what others think or believe. It only matters what you want. Only she did not know.

He had food brought to her on a tray. While she ate, he told her about the grandeur of the funeral procession, all the people lining the streets. Welford had gone out in style. She thought he would be pleased. Despite all the revelations at the end of his life, she had cared for him too long not to do right by him in the end.

Part:

After she had eaten as much as she could stomach, she allowed the duchess to escort her to her bedroom, where a bath was prepared. She wanted to be alone, but the duchess still been, talking constantly about nonsensical things as though she felt a need to fill the hovering silence.

Once she was in her nightdress, Jannie strolled to the nursery that she had begun furnishing for the first time she was with a child. Sitting in the locker, she was finally, finally, alone with her sorrow.

In the library, Ansley looked up as his mother walked into the room and went to the table holding several decanters. She poured herself a brandy and sat in a chair across from him, one beside Lenny, who was keeping Ansley company' even if it entailed little more than drinking with him. How is she? He asked.

I am most worried about her. She is presently sitting in the nursery and rocking. But all afternoon and evening, she does not weep nor wail. It is not natural. It cannot be healthy for the child.

His stomach clenched. He could not bear the thought of Jannie going through another loss such as that. Would she even survive it? He stood. I will speak to her.

He took two steps before his mother spoke up again. Ansley?

Stopping, he glanced back at her. He knew the sorrow on her face had nothing to do with the mourning of Welford. Have you considered, my son, that you should marry the girl?

Far too many times to count.

It is customary for a wife to mourn for two years, he reminded her.

A year would suffice, but in this instance ...she carries your child, Ansley. Marry her and claim it.

The terms of our arrangement were that this child would be Jannie's and Welford's; forgive my indelicacy but he is dead.

It does not change the fact that he boasted to all of Rockville that he sired this child. His passing complicated matters. I cannot deny that. But it does not relieve me of my promise not to claim this child. must you be so blasted noble? It grows wearisome.

I took everything from him, Mother. I will not take what was to be his child. Besides, I doubt Jannie would have me. She never struck me as a fool.

He almost smiled at the clipped edge that went with her words. In her eyes, her sons could do no wrong. He wondered if Jannie would feel the same about hers. He suspected she would. With only a nod, he left his mother then, knowing she would not follow.

It was strange to walk through the somber residence, to compare it with the joviality that abounded at Herndon Hall the last time he was there for the fox hunt. Death brought a pall over everything. It did not help matters that none of the clocks released a single tick or tock' having been stopped at the hour of Welford's passing' and all the mirrors were draped in black crepe. He made his way up the stairs to the nursery.

At the door, he hesitated. It was closed. He should have knocked, but if he announced himself, she might not invite him in. With a deep sigh, he opened the door. The room was dark, save for a single lamp that burned low. He heard the heartrending weeping, and it took him a moment to find her. She was sitting on the floor, pressed in a distant corner, her face buried in her hands, her rounded shoulders shaking with the force of her sobs. His courageous Jannie, alone with her sorrow. She would not succumb to his mother. But at least she could grieve in private.

He considered leaving, but he could no more abandon her now than he could cease to breathe. Quietly, he moved over to her and crouched, his knees popping to announce his arrival.

As though only just noticing his presence, she began to swipe at her cheeks. Please go away... Ansley.

He grabbed her wrists to still her actions, and she jerked free. Please leave me in peace. Are you at peace, Jannie? It hardly sounds like it. I know you mourn him'

I mourn so much more than his passing. It was all a lie. He made a mockery of our life here. He loved someone else. He loved you.

He did not! And you knew! She slammed her balled fist into his shoulder. you knew! I thought ...I thought you had a care for me.

I do have a care for you. I love you, but now was not the time to tell her the truth of those words. No, you do not. You would not have kept his secrets from me. The guilt over what we did gnawed at me. As much as I wanted this child, I betrayed everything I held dear. It was so easy for the two of you because you place no value on loyalty, on vows. I thought I knew you, but the man I knew would not have condoned what Welford did. You cut off the same cloth. Please leave me. I do not like him. I would never betray you. you already have. She hit him again.

-And again-

His heart died a bit with each blow. He had never meant to bring her this pain' even as he had known when the proposition was first made that she would have to betray herself to embrace it.

He wrapped his arms around her to stop her flailing and rocked her. easy, Jannie, easy, sweetheart. You do not want to hurt the child.

Her sobs broke free, racking her body. I wish I had said no, Jannie. I swear to you, I wish I had. I hurt so bad, Ansley. I know. Why did he have to leave me now?

And he knew despite the betrayals, she still loved Welford. It is all right, Jannie. It will be all right.

He did not know how the bloody hell it would be, but he would find a way.

He hated painting. It was delicate and girly. Way too feminine for her taste but it was what she did.

She was a natural painter, not one of those sensitive fainters to fall first sign of distress but a fainter still. It could have been worse, He had to concede, at least she was not a poker.

'Pay up, told you she would wake up.'

'She smells like a roast.' She knew those voices.

'Unfortunate thing.' The second one was unable to leave everything well enough alone. 'Delicate thing, isn't she?'

Someone snorted. He groans, opening one eye and shutting it. Too much light. What she saw was a mage light hovering above her head on the ceiling. 'Ack!'

He rolled away from the light. Her body creaked. 'Which one of you heifers called me delicate.' She rasped.

'Honor did.' That was Lily talking, giggling. She wanted to giggle at herself, she had not been sure she would see either of them again. Now that she was hearing their voices it hit hard how much she had missed them.

'Tell her...to go jump in a lake.'

'Only if you come with me.' Honor spoke for herself. 'Heely, you shell like we could stick you on a table. I am not exactly a fan of smoked foods either.'

He grimaced, opening her eyes again. They focused quickly, targeting the tall blonde woman standing overhead with the challenging blue eyes. 'I try.'
Lily stood beside her mate smiling broadly, practically bouncing. Someone was missing.

'Where is his Highness?' he asked. Where was Sh-h?

'In a meeting with some of the Elders. He has not left your side until now. He was confident that you would not wake up until later today.' and it was just her luck to prove him wrong.

'Mara is here?' He sat up then. Where exactly had Sh-h taken them?

'Calm down Heely, you are still in Median, Mara came to visit for a while. Before all this happens.' Lily told her. 'She wants to know what happened-'

The mood in the room changed from a happy reunion to somber and bleak. 'The city was burning.' That was all she knew. There was no way she could produce it.

'We are known.' Lily looked away. 'And now it is not and that is all that should matter for the moment.' He was impressed by her optimism. She could not do it, that did not particularly matter. Why was the Median burning in the first place?

'Come on Heely, Sh-h gave us orders not to let you out of our sights until he comes back.'

'Are you going to listen to him?' He raised a brow at the tall unruly blond-haired woman.

'Depends on if you are going to tell us how in the seven hells you were kidnapped.' Honor told her to come forward. 'What happened to you? Why are you not in Kraal with Arcane? What took you two so long to get back, why does Sh-h have that thing around his neck-' Lily put a hand on her mate's mouth.

'We want all the details to be what she means.'

He regarded her two friends with an assessing stare. They did not budge. 'I might tell you if you tell me where I can clean up.' She made a shell of smoke and meat, all she needed was an apple.

'My pleasure.' With Honor on her right and Lily on her left they made it to the bathhouse.

Two weeks had passed, and Jannie's lethargy seemed to worsen. She could not seem to decipher her feelings regarding Welford or Ansley. The only feelings she truly trusted were those she felt for the baby. She knew she should return to Herndon Hall, but she seemed unable to work up the energy needed to order the servants.

With her elbow resting on the sill, and her chin propped in her hand, she sat at the window in her bedchamber gazing out at what she could see of Rockville at night. Which was not much. Trees blocked her view of the street. She saw the lighted drive but knew it would still be empty. The Duchess of Greystone was hosting a ball this evening. It was always well attended, so Jannie knew no one would call that evening.

Following the interment, the men returned to the residence. Adhering to the custom that women did not attend funerals, the society matrons waited with Jannie in the front parlor. As Ansley passed by on his way to taking the men to the library for libations, he caught sight of Jannie with women sitting around her, his mother holding her hand. Her pale pallor concerned him. He wanted to lift her into his arms and carry her upstairs to her bedchamber, away from the madness.

Instead, he pushed forth to the library, where footmen had already begun pouring drinks for the guests. When all had a glass in hand, Ansley lifted his and an expectant hush filled the room.

to Welford. He was courageous in all things, met all of life's challenges head-on. You will be missed, old friend. hear! Hear!

As Ansley brought down the whiskey, Lord Amsel said, at least we can all be assured that there will be fox hunting when we join him. I daresay, he will see to it that all is put to rights in that regard.

Another toast followed, more whiskey was swallowed, and quiet conversation and laughter ensued as the men began to reminisce about Welford. Ansley wandered over to where Westcliffe and Stephen were talking. Now that he knew the truth of their parentage, it amazed him that he had not suspected it before. Westcliffe was dark-haired, like his sire, and Stephen was blond, fair as a summer afternoon. Westcliffe's eyes were deep Black, almost black, and Stephen's was blue with lines within.

The arrangements for Welford were nicely made, Stephen said quietly.

Ansley nodded, distracted by the man he had spotted nearby talking with Lord Sheffield. Do my eyes deceive me or is that my cousin Green Demure talking with Sheffield?

Both his brothers looked discreetly in the direction

Ansley had shown. I would say so, yes, Westcliffe murmured. He is next in line for Welford's title, isn't he? quiet. Does he look to be a man going mad with syphilis?

Westcliffe and Stephen both looked at him as though he were the one going mad. Had Welford lied about that as well? Damn him! The man was turning out to be an expert manipulator. I think I will have a word. But getting there meant running the gauntlet of those who wished to offer their condolences. It was no secret that he and Welford had been close. So, he graciously acknowledged the kind words that were spoken as he wended his way toward his target. He was not there when he heard Sheffield say, ...bated breath to discover if Lady Welford would deliver a son.

I do not know if the courts will care one way or the other. My cousin was paralyzed. If he gets her with a child, I will eat my hat. shall I fetch it for you? Ansley asked.

Grean jerked around so quickly that the whiskey in his glass nearly sloshed over the sides.

Likewise, your cousin. You are not on the branch of the tree that is in line for the title so perhaps you have not given it any thought. But you have. If you are wise, you will hold your tongue on the matter. Is that a threat? It is a promise. Lady Welford has suffered enough during the past few years, and she deeply mourns the passing of her husband. That does not mean he got her with a child. I

have heard rumors that you danced with her, that you were seen walking alone with her in the garden. As a favor to Welford, I attended to her where he could not. does that include her bed?

Part:

His fist shot up so fast that the pain was ricocheting from his knuckles to his shoulder before he even realized he had delivered the blow to Grean's chin. His cousin dropped to the floor with an unceremonious thud. Completely out. He was not going to get up any time soon.

Westcliffe and Stephen were instantly at Ansley's side.

The room was closing in. If she reached out both her hands, she could push them apart. He clenched her easily at her side pushing away the crazy thoughts. The walls were not closing in, it was all in her head.

'Lady?' He shook her head, staring off Aisling's advance to help. The woman missed nothing and the way He had been glaring at her confines was not missed. She just could not help it, she refused to go back to sleep. Not while Genny and Away sat in the Purgatory, goddess this was such a mess. Worse, all of this was her fault.

'I need a favor, Aisling-' He licked her lips wishing she could think of another way. 'You're a healer in the palace, but you're a Dancer.'

'It isn't officially known that I'm a Dancer.' Aisling said warily. He paused and said that made sense. In the palace Dancers were not particularly trusted. It was for the best that it was not known that Aisling was one.

'Are there other dancers in the palace, ones that I don't know of?' he asked unsurely. There had to be, she refused to believe that the Guild would be content to sit in the eyes of the palace and not have spies looking out for Her or for the Guild itself.

'There are a few I know and a lot more I don't.' Aisling had been hard at work writing down something in her small book. Her pen stroked in fast scrawls across the sheet until He looked away afraid that she would lose her focus and slip away into another nightmare. 'I will see what I can find out for you.' She watched Aisling stand and walk to the exit.

He shivered; she could withstand a lot of things but not another nightmare. Thank the Goddess that she had her sanity, for now. After the last dream, He was not sure how she could trust it anymore. What if this was a dream too? She could not take falling in and out of dreams, maybe if she pinched herself- ouch! Well, it hurt like this was real.

'Lady?' Aisling's concerned tone crept in on her musing. He quickly hid her arm where her pinch had already started to bruise.

'Can you contact someone?' he asked quickly. 'I want to know what is going on.' She needed to get Aisling away from her too.

'I cannot-'

'What of Monroe then?' He asked, trying to find something to get her. Aisling's face clouded, telling her all she needed to know. There was something between Monroe and Aisling, a friendship hopefully.

'I don't want him there alone- my protection for him means nothing if I'm not there to enforce it.' Aisling frowned.

'You and the heir are more important.' Aisling said bravely, he wanted to shake her.

'Aisling, we're dying!' She hated to see the healer flinch. 'You said it yourself- nothing can be done but to wait for lucidity to leave me, from the inside, out, right? I want the people I care about to be safe, please.' She knew she had the healer when her shoulders drooped. Her formidable form shook in deep tremors. He rushed quickly to hug her; she hated being so harsh. So blunt. 'Please?' She begged.

It felt like an eternity passed before Aisling sighed, it said everything she wanted to know. 'Thank you!' He hugged her tightly.

'I'll be back before noon,' Aisling said briskly pulling away. 'You're not to leave this room.'

'Yes,' He nodded, crossing her fingers behind her back as if she were a child. They used to pull this when they were children. Crises crossed my lies got lost.' she muttered over her shoulder. She knew that it was still early morning before the sun had even stirred. There was time yet she just had to-

'Princess?' He jumped at the voice as if her very thoughts had summoned this phantom voice.

'Oh, thank the Goddess!' The voice was exuberant. It was also defiantly male. He wanted to cry; the poison was setting in early. She was becoming delusional. By the stars, she was sitting in a cell with a babysitter thinking that her husband was speaking to her.

'But I am speaking to you Heania.' Her voice said happily. 'My Heania.' he added in an afterthought.

'Gods are too cruel.' He said slumping down onto her bed. Aisling gave her one more stern stare before departing from the room. He sighed watching her leave. She had been making the feeling so much worse. She was sitting in a cell waiting to die, just brooding. He curled up into herself to stare at the wall with the flickering flames. 'I see you in Her arms, now I'm hearing you-'

'Of course, you hear me, you are wearing the talisman I gave you. He does not you remember?' His hands flew into her shirt feeling for the signet resting against her breast. Her fingers clutched it so hard she felt its imprint embedding into her skin.

'I didn't.' She admitted solemnly.

'It does not matter- I heard you scream. He you made my heart stop.' Her voice became tight. 'Where are you?' His questions came in a tirade that demanded answers. He took a deep breath, she could just see him sitting, his leg shaking with impatience as he forced everything else to stay still. She smiled.

'I am in the Guild, Nevaeh, Aisling, Genny, and Away smuggled me out. Meridian did as well.'

'I'm so glad.' He sounded so glad. 'You and the baby are safe.' for now.

'Yes,' He wheedled, she had to tell him the truth, but she was reluctant to intrude upon his happiness. 'Genny and Away were caught and taken to the purgatory.'

'For keeping you safe?' He said clearly, believing that she was wrong. She wished that she were wrong.

'The Golemn got me.' she could not spare him that detail. 'They found me outside the temples and tried to get me out- I think someone alerted the Guards

because they thought I was being kidnapped. Everyone that saved me is a traitor of the Crown.' The Median was going to explode when they heard this tomorrow. The Queen had disappeared not once but twice.

'It said your name?' She spoke when it became impossible to stay silent.

'Yes.' He shook, remembering the bleakness of the whole thing. 'It pierced my chest. She said, 'I am not going to make it that long,' the words caught in her throat. Instead, she said. 'I need your help.' she told him after a moment after she realized she could not say the stuff in the middle.

'I'm on my way home, Princess I swear to you-'

'I need Mican's help- She we aren't strong enough to fight this.' His voice tightened. 'Goddess, I don't even have my magic to help me-' He stopped mid-speech a thought in her mind forming that was so ridiculous that it might work. 'She, did Mican get that necklace off?'

'No.' he was firm. He did not care, one way or another he was coming home.

'Do you think he could do a spell that would give me my magic back?' She asked slowly, there was a pause in the air that told her that he had stopped whatever task he had been doing. 'She I feel like such a fool.' This had to be the answer, it had been there the whole time.

'I will ask him but enough is enough, I will be home within two days.' It took five horseback to reach Median from the Bud border. That was without a raiding party and with a fast horse.

'The Golemn's poison will set in by high noon. I have a lot to do between now and then.' He frowned; she had a couple of hours. Half a day at most. She would not leave her friends in the Purgatory; she would not allow Meridian's name to be tarnished. 'Aisling told me if I am lucky then high noon is it.'

'I will ask Mican; He I will be home before anything else happens to you. Just rest, when you open your eyes, I will be home.' He wanted to argue that the last time she closed her eyes she dreamed that Nevaeh had taken her place. She could not get those words out either.

'That sounds lovely.' He said instead of forcing cheerfulness she did not feel. Her whole body was strung tight but numb to all pain. Being told she had less than a day to set everything in the right direction went beyond everything.

'It is true. I will be home in no time, with a cure.' He was sure there was nothing for her to do but believe him. He sounded so confident; it was more to assure her than anything.

'I believe you.' he said softly.

'Good so I want my girls to just rest until I get back, swear.' he demanded of her.

'I'm not a Truth-teller anymore.' He smiled a bit. 'And stop calling it a girl.' she snapped because she had to. Not letting She have his way on everything was a luxurious pleasure.

'I do not care- do not take on everything by yourself when you do not have to. Let the Guild take care of you. u she is her because that is the way it is. Get used to it Love.' He made a face knowing arguing now was futile.

'They take care of me because- of you.' He shook her head surprised to hear Her snort.

'They would kill me to save you, He. Haven't you heard the stories going on about you? The Dancer's Queen. The Queen that builds her city with her people, the stories that have reached you are inspiring.' the awe in She's voice dumbfounded her. She had barely been out of her room since it was discovered she was pregnant. 'Those people care about you because they love you.' So there, deal with it, you are loved.

He clenched her jaw unsure how to deal with what he was telling her. 'I don't know how to feel about that, I'll worry about it later- She I need your help for something else now.' He sketched out her half-formed plan of how she planned to get Genny and Away out of Purgatory. Aisling might have known people in the Guild but there was no way to know if any of them could help. There was not any time to wait or lose, she had till noon.

She listened to her, heard her out before he told her what he knew. 'Why do you need to know?'

'So-o, I can give the information to someone to help get them out.' He told him easily. It was only a half-lie. He did not have to know that she had every intention of breaking them out.

-And-

After another tight silence, she told her the rest of everything she needed to know. Including a secret way of escaping out of the Guild. She felt horrible by the end. When he made her promise not to do anything stupid, she had to do another Crisscrossed lie that got lost. She told him that she would not. Their goodbye was and 'I love you.' She would never see him again if she could not stop the poison. It was all on her.

'Lady?' He jumped a small smile lit her face as she saw Nevaeh take hesitant steps toward her, Meridian a couple behind her. Both looked so tired He wanted to shove them into the nearest seat.

'Sit, sit.' He waved them into seats if she was going to do this, she needed their help. Even Meridian's if he had helped her out the Guild then maybe she had been wrong in suspecting him all along, Nevaeh too. The two of them had been unconsciously high on her list of suspects even though she and Nevaeh had become close friends. At least she had not had to track them down, they had come to her.

'Lady.' The Meridian nodded cautiously, his normally smooth face was handsome and clean cut. Right then he just looked so exhausted. He wanted nothing more but to give him her blanket and tell him to rest. 'Forgive me for not getting to you sooner.' His brows knitted together in confusion. Her face was the mirror of Nevaeh's.

'I don't-'

'I should have warned you sooner and I did not, for that I am sorry.'

'Meridian.' He said slowly unsure what she could say. 'Be blunt with me.' She liked to blunt it did not give her time to be filled with dread, doom, or despair. It all just hit at once leaving you to catch up.

His face twisted as though he would be sick before stealing into weary features. 'I've known this was going to happen- not that you were going to be attacked that night, but I knew it was to come.' so they had been plotting her attack for some time? He had to have seen it coming, she had and ignored it. It had been stupid to deny that it could happen. She had been foolish, now this was the price.

'Are you telling me now because you know the price for treason? Or because you think it will not matter?' She would be dead by noon high without her magic, it was the only thing that she was assured.

'I know what treason means.' He said stiffly. 'And you do matter, your life matters to me and it was foolish to think I could stave off your attack like I did.'

He did not know if she believed him or not. He could just be telling her this now so she would see that he had mercy. Or he could be telling the truth. 'I've seen what you've done even with everyone trying to hinder you, myself included.' He and Nevaeh exchanged glances. 'I would like to see what other changes you can make.'

Part:

'Even though I'm a woman?' He could not help her sarcasm. From the first time she met Meridian he had not done anything to hide what he thought of a woman's capabilities.

'It is a pleasure to say I have met a few exceptions to my philosophy. I want everything you can offer Median for Defama.' the spoke of his lands. He wanted to ask what made him think he would be allowed to keep them but did not feel sure enough to taunt him in that way.

'Tell me everything.' He sat forth; Meridian's eyes widened when he realized she was dressed in a simple shift- a nightdress. His eyes quickly glanced away. He snorted; the women of Ysterym wore less going about their daily routines. What made her so different?

'There is a lot to confess Lady.' He said simply. She had to ask then, fine.

'Who started the fire?' That was the most important. If she did nothing else before she died, she wanted whoever did it dead.

'The University.' The meridian spoke without hesitation. He sat back stung. So, he knew, he had truly known all this time!

'I've only just found out about it through the ears I have, just like everyone else.' he said quickly.

'You should be ashamed!' He snapped. 'Goddess, do you know how many people died! Homes and families that need justice-' He looked away disgusted only to turn back to him with a glare. 'That's inexcusable!' At least he had the decency to look ashamed. 'Why?' Why was the city burned, there was not a good enough reason for it, but she had to know.

'Ysterym is a delicate balance of powers, Lady.' The Meridian murmured. 'The Gods temples, the Crown, the Guilds. As King, she represented all.' He frowned. 'He is the Crown as king, the king is appointed by the Gods, and he is a known figure head in all the main Guilds. He is all.'

'Where does that leave the University?' Nevaeh asked curiously. It was the first time she had spoken in a while.

'Don't be fooled lady,' Meridian spoke to Nevaeh but did not look up. 'The University is a Guild too; they just choose to distance themselves. The Temples could be considered Guilds...but since it is the Gods, they are separate.' He nodded, still confused. 'The University feels superior because they have magic. A gift given to them by no other than the Gods- they think they are gods. That is what

rumors are saying. Biseal believes he is a godly deity.' Meridian's voice held as much contempt for the man as He felt. 'He had even been an advisor to King She, he was recaptured a season before you came into our court Lady.' He jumped, which surprised her. She would have thought Biseal was too high and mighty but then the position did suit him. He would be in power to influence a King. He would never turn that down.

'Why did he step down?' he asked curiously.

'Oh, he did not. King She...retired him.'

'Why would he do that?' He asked, she knew she knew nothing but now was her chance to snatch answers. She had to take it. Even when it was taking up her precious time.

'Because Biseal didn't want the Crown to be tainted with foreign blood.' He rocked back as though she had been slapped or kicked. She could have thought of multiple things but never that.

'I remember something like that.' Nevaeh frowned looking at He. 'She threw him out the door. Nothing was going to change his mind about bringing you here.' He waited to hear traces of resentment and found none. Nevaeh looked at her in open honesty. 'I forgot about that He, I am sorry. I know that being dismissed did not sit well with Biseal. He has been known to have a temper.' The Meridian nodded.

Shaking her head, she wanted Meridian to tell her more. He was spellbound as she listened in horror to what he said next. 'It started the moment She disappeared. You could just feel it stirring. The University started chirping about the displeasure the Gods had for the King for taking a foreign wife- one with no power to match his own at that.' His eyes shut but she listened on. 'The fact that you did not carry his brand did not help. They insisted the Gods were not pleased. The Temples were not swayed to believe what the University said. The Danceer's Guild was quick defending you both. When you both went missing it became increasingly hard to leave the Gods out of it. You were gone for so long it was hard to tell what rumors the cities were and what the University started.' What Biseal started. He thought icily.

'We all tried to ignore it, but we couldn't when the fire started.'

Meridian's words did not sit right with her. Someone had to have known something. Fires did not just start, they were set. 'We didn't know anything about it until we heard it roaring.' By then no one could have stopped it, it burned wild and free untamed, unchecked. Only by divine interference.

'By then there was nothing you could have done.' He said numbly. 'By the time I made it back Median was blazing- nothing would have helped.' except her magic. He thought he was feeling sick. If she and she had returned a moment or worse a day later, so much more would have been lost.'

'Except the divine power the Gods bestowed upon the University.'

Nevaeh's voice was faint. He spared her a glance, finding her flushed with her lips pinched tight in anger. He wondered if she looked similar, about to burst into anger.

'Of course, they would have been there to pick up the pieces- to save the day.' The meridian said with disgust. Again, He could not tell if he was faking it. He was still trying to claim what was not his or anyone except Her's. Did he think he could get a crown out of this, by telling her?

A grim smile touched his lips and finally, he looked up at her. He found no comfort. 'Then you came back, out of the smoke. Out of nowhere you come in and your Guardian roars fear back into everyone's hearts. Making demands- without your husband.' He chuckled a little. 'You were a remarkable sight when you announced you were pregnant- with all the healers backing your claim. There was no chance of dethroning you- everyone knew it.' Biseal knew it too. He did not want foreign blood mixing with the Crown, you and She having a baby was his worst dream come true.

'So, they sent the Golemn to attack me?' He asked incredulously.

'Attack you- and the child.' He agreed. 'I can't say it was the University who sent it Lady, there are a lot of people, powerful people who wish to see you dead.' He flinched. 'There are a lot of people who feel the same way Biseal does.' that bloodlines should not be mixed.

'Well, if you are finding-up with being against me,' He licked her lips trying to find a way to effectively bottled up her anger. 'I want you to help me.'

'I was always-' He raised a hand, and he went quiet.

'You didn't immediately come forth, you waited until it was too late.' she told him. 'I nearly died, that is against me!' her voice turned hard as it rose higher. 'Now, are you going to help me or are you going to stay here and explain to Aisling and the Elders where I've gone.'

The Meridian did not miss a moment. 'I'll follow you.' She turned to Nevaeh who was fighting her own battle with her anger.

'I'm with you.' she said, her deep brown gaze burned into He's sight and she looked away. They were both too angry for words.

He nodded relieved. She had hoped they would say that. 'Good, here is what I need you two to do.'

~*~

Honor told her the coast was clear, after a day of resting and endless fussing and snarling (the latter on Ham's part.) the other women had finally taken pity on her. As well they should. Alec grumbled but did not try to keep her confined.

He slipped out of her room and went away. She was free for the first time in what felt like forever. Free of the constant fussing and naps and growls for her to wake and eat when all she wanted to do was sleep through oblivion. Someone was always with her, mostly Her growling at her to not even think about making a run for the door. She would not dream of it she knew he had locked it.

-And-

When she woke for the first time truly, she had not been there like before. It was for the best; he was always arguing with her about eating or drinking. What did it matter, there were people outside these walls that had not had a meal in days?

He headed in the direction Alec had sent her, this time with him at her heels. Towards the little room that led out into the city, she was going to visit the temples again and see if she could snoop around the palace grounds a little more.

He turned around the last corner so lost in thought she smacked into a wall. 'Where are you going?' He cursed; it was worse than a wall. It was the Heir's chest.

She stood walking with another man Him did not recognize. He was tall and young-looking.

Possibly a few years older than she was. His hair was red Him marveled at it. She liked him instantly. 'Himalia, this is Unsway. An old friend of mine. We

trained together.' He nodded smiling up at the other man, she got distracted by his smile. It was handsome and sweet. Herr's arms snaked around her, and she did not let go.

'Now back to what I was asking earlier.' He tugged her. 'Where were you going?'

'Out.' she moved around him only to be snagged and two men blocking her way. He growled. He growled back, then Alec growled hissing for them all to back away from her. Anyway, tumbled over himself to put distance between them. She did not move.

'Not so fast Love, Mara wants to speak to you and a couple of the Elders are eager to meet you.'

Planting her feet, Him looked between the two men. 'Why is that?' She should have known he would never let her keep her balance. When he tugged, she flew forward, his head rested on top of hers. 'Because you are the only one who has been outside these walls in days. you my insolent one is the only one who has been to the palace.' he chewed on that. He felt him growl in disapproval. 'They want to speak to the woman who stopped the fire?' Ham's gut twisted; she had not felt her magic since.

Instead, she turned in Herr's grip to Unsway surprised to find him watching them. A bemused look plastered his face. Her face felt hot from the temple to below her chin. When she ducked her head, he chuckled.

'It isn't as though I know more than they do.' He grumbled upset that she had gotten flustered. She took her hand and began the walk.

'I have no doubt, but they shall not tell me a thing until they know how you are doing. They want you to sit in on these meetings.'

'Are you using me?' She glared at her husband when he did not answer she turned Away. 'Doesn't it sound like he is using me?'

'Yep.' Anyway, dodged Herr's swing, dancing out of the way delicately.

'Don't be mean to him.' He chastises. 'So, you really need me.' her smile grew as she watched Her pale and shuffle away from her. 'I like them already.' He told Her feeling smug. Finally, people who knew how it should be. She seriously needed to follow the lead on this. Beside them, Unsway chuckled under his breath. He could not help but look at him again. He was tall, a little shorter than her. Lean and corded with tightly compressed muscle he showed off unintentionally. Like Her, he wore nothing but the customary Dancer's vest and long pants and sandals.

His footsteps were never heard, ever. He wonders how much practice it took to walk without sound. She and unsway made it look so graceful, simple even.

One dancer to her left and one to her right. He had an escort down the halls to wherever they decided to take her.

'Where is everyone?' he asked, feeling the coolness of the hall's snake over her skin. She never saw anyone in the halls. On rare occasions, she came across one or two, they were always quick on their way.

'Most of them left.' Anyway, murmured down to her.

'Why would they do that?'

'The fire scared many of them. Others have family they wished to go check on, they will be back. Others were sent to send word to the other Guilds. This location is not a large one, there were never many of us here to begin with. Six dozen at one time at most. Except during celebrations and holidays.'

He nodded. 'Why didn't the fire scare you away?' He glanced down at her, wondering why she was asking so many questions. He did not seem bothered by it; she would keep asking even after he was.

'Do you think I frighten easily?' He stood tall and bold, puffing out his chest as they continued down the hall.

'He's shyder than a mouse.' she interjected.

'Am not!' Anyway, she glared over her head.

'You nearly peed yourself over him.' He jerked his thumb at Alec trailing at Ham's heels. Anyway, I looked down and shuddered.

'Braver men would have soiled themselves trying to get away from that-'

'Alec.' He put it in gently. 'His name is Alec.'

Anyway, I nodded, winking at her. 'To get away from Alec.' He nodded and they walked on.

'Him!' Mara was the first to greet her, the older woman walked forward to greet them the instant they stepped into the room. The older woman's arms wrapped around Him pulling her away from Her and she found herself clasping her back. In the short while she was in the man Mystery guild, she liked the Mara. The small woman was stronger than she looked, and much sharper tongued than her sweet appearance let on. Her silver rope of hair was a deception, and her small form was all show.

'Mara.' He let go but Mara held tight to her shoulders pushing her back.

'You look different.' she mused; He watched the calculations run through the back of her dark eyes. 'Happier.'

He did not know what to tell her, she was incredibly happy. It had been until she came back here to find cinder instead of houses. 'What is going on?' He remembered that there were more people in the room beside them. They stood at

Mara's back patiently waiting. He noted there were two women and one man. The Elders.

One woman was a native, the other two she could not place.

'We were hoping you would be able to shed a small light on that.' the native woman closest to Mara came forward. She was tall and slender, age lines etched into her face, and the hand she extended in greeting. He took it marveling at how her skin glowed in the mage light.

'Princess, this is Dawn.' She easily stepped in. 'Dawn is an Elder of the Guild here in Median.'

He said this with obvious pride. Do not be fooled by the Nana facade was what He got out of his words.

'Dawn this is Queen Himalia, my wife.' He again marveled at how much pride he said that with. He had never spoken of her like that before, she liked it.

Sharp brown eyes cut her attention back to the woman in front of her. He was right, He tried not to squirm under the barely had scrutiny. Beside her, Alec growled pressing himself to her knee.

'We've heard a lot about you.' Dawn finally smiled, changing her face completely. The last two elders stepped forward.

'Mara loves to talk about you and you're singing.' The man raised his hand, and He took it. He was stocky and packed in a way that should have made his movement heavy. They did not, he was just as graceful as any dancer. He did not smile like Dawn and Mara did. He did not try to hide his scrutiny. 'Is it true you fell off the stage?' She winces.

Part:

She saved her from answering. 'Him, this is Sheldon and Neelan of Median-'

'Formerly of Rockville.' Neelan put it in. He nodded, that explained it.

Neelan was tall too. Taller than Sheldon by several inches, her eyes were brown and doe-like. She sucked a lot of people in that way. 'Welcome.' He nodded.

'Nice to meet you all.'

'Enough formality.' Mara waved them off. 'Merry met my sister.' They all moved away settling on the pillows circling the room. He was alone standing in a room of Elders.

Alec purred, rubbing against her leg before a warm presence pulled her back. Anyway, I nudged her shoulder before settling onto a pillow. That left one for them. He settles in letting Her draw her back into his lap. Without thinking about it He tapped at his mental barriers. He let her in. Does this mean you are not mad

with me anymore?' He did not answer her, not right away. He never spoke, his mind felt like a hand caressing over her own. Soft and intimate, warm- Sheldon cleared his throat. Four elders, Unsway and Alec, all watched them. All amused.

'Pay attention.' Alec flopped down at her thigh laying his head-on Uway's lap. The man tensed but reached his hand out to stroke her kit's head.

'Start from the beginning.' Mara encouraged. He did, describing all that she could remember about being taken from what happens in Kraal to how they got out. No one so much as blinked when she told them of walking through an iron gate and turning invisible. When He got to the fire it all changed.

'That was you!' Neelan squeaked. He ducked her head hiding behind her hair.

'I'm not sure.' she told them. 'Maybe.'

'It was.' Everyone turned to Her who had not spoken since He had taken up telling the tale.

'Himalia can do things. she has power over words.' he squeezed her hand. 'At first I thought she was a truth teller too- or just a seer.' all four elders nodded. 'But when she lied, such as in the tower she spoke it and it became the truth.'

He ducked her head away from everyone, not liking the way they studied her as one would study a fascinating piece of art. 'What are you trying to say?' Anyway, lean forward toward them.

'That somehow her will out ceded the truth. She is a binder not a seer.'

Ham's mouth gaped. 'Binder?' Neel scooted forward. Dawn tilted her head. 'There has not been one of those in my lifetime. centuries.'

He shrugged. 'Sorry.' he said to her. He better- be.

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'I was not sure. Do not be upset.'

He ignored him. 'How are you so sure now?'

'You stopped that fire and it is better to come to terms with it now. You are a truth binder.'

'Can you show us?' Mara asks. Ham's chest squeezed.

'I haven't felt my magic since the fire.'

Sheldon nodded. 'You overexerted yourself' He was so confident and graceful He could not help but like him. 'It will come back.'

'Hope so-o.' She squeezed her hand.

'I do as well.' Mara agrees. 'It sounds as though you will be needing it.'

He wanted to tell them that they were the ones in more danger than she was. Neelan spoke before she could.

'I agree, just what is going on up there.' as one they all turned to Him.

No one in the room knew but they all had a feeling. 'We need to get back there.' She told them.

'You aren't going anywhere.' He interjected. 'Not with this,' she tugged the chain around his neck. 'You aren't.' If her hunch were right, he would be arrested on sight, something was going on in the palace she could feel it.

'What are you suggesting?' Dawn asked.

'I don't know but I know who started all this.' He gripped her shirt. 'It is all speculation of course.' They all nodded. Of course, 'none of Heir's court is...brave enough, to do this. Few of them have the brain for it.

Her frown. 'I left Nevaeh as my ear; she should have reported to me.'

'How is she going to do that?'

'She has a talisman.' He frowns; he had never told her that. Did they speak at all?

'She hasn't contacted me at all.' They all shifted under his rising anger, except Him.

'Do you think she could be behind this?'

He did not say anything, Sheldon did. 'You think a woman did this?' he ignored the hostile glares of the four women. 'Oh, calm down.' he growled when Neelan poked him. He jumped when she growled back. 'All I meant was there no way a woman would be given enough influence to do this sort of thing.'

'Who says she was its front runner and face.' He mused to all. 'There are a lot of men that would do that and let someone else control the mind of everything. You know a man with all the looks and no mind.'

'Have you ever met a man with a mind?' Mara, a fallen angel on earth, teased the three in the room. He laughed. Angels never really change look at me with my 105 years.

'It is my misfortune to know several.' she blushed when unsway winked at her. 'I must agree it is irritating when they try to make sense of impossibilities.' Herr's lips quirked up. 'But do you see my point?'

Sheldon pursed his lips. 'We do.'

'That is why I think I should be the one to go back.' He volunteers before they produce anything else. He shot her a look, but the idea stayed in the air. 'I'll go back and report to you- as often as I can.'

'Him-'

'We need information.' He rounded him knowing that tone of voice. He was going to try and get fussy with her again. 'Did you know that they have people thinking the Gods are behind all of this. That they are displeased!' Everyone winced. 'I'm going.'

'Not without me.' He sat up straighter, He poked him back placing her hand on top of the necklace.

'No, you are not.' He had no magic, but he could shift. If they were placed upwards, it would put them in hellfire. It was not happening.

'Besides.' She went on. 'They would arrest you on sight.'

'For what...?' He blinked. 'I was kidnapped!'

'Who do you think helped with that abduction?' he raised a brow. He cursed. She was not the only one who had thought that way. Her abductors had helped to get in and get her out of the palace. 'This is good-I think.' Neelan chimed in. Everyone turned to her. 'It is not very old- a few decades. There was an assassination- yes on the king and queen and his father. There was no heir but his brother.' He winced she knew where the woman was going, and it was not going to help. Neelan went on. 'Instead of the brother being named heir, the brother's wife was going to be crowned Queen-'

'Because she was beloved by the people, and they thought the brother was cold and heartless. He loved women and to gamble with the treasury.' He interjected pressing into Herr's back to stop his trembling. 'We know the story.'

Neelan beamed; didn't she see how upset this was making Her? 'You know this story?'

He answered but was cut off by Her 'Yes'

'The story is of my mother', She interjected. He squirmed in his lap. His body was trembling. Only family and close friends knew the true story of Queen Chiara.

'The Ask Queen?' Sheldon frowned. 'It can't be the same girl- her hair was-'

'Black.' He nodded. 'Anything is possible when the Gods are involved.' He shuddered. 'My mother's life was not always a happy one. Her uncle married her off to a foreign prince, the older Mystery prince. So-o, he was so sure that she would be Queen that he did not care about the rumors that surrounded the man he was marrying her to. He was cold, and the wife he had before died under mysterious circumstances.' He wrapped his arms around her, He relaxed sinking back wishing she could do more to comfort him. This was the story, the only story, He had ever seen Rakish get upset over.

'Instead, the King crowned his younger son heir', Him squirmed under the pressure of Heir's hands.

'Both King and heir soon met their ends one by poison and the other by arrow.'

Every person in the room sat in silence under Herr's words. Even Alec prompts his head-on Uway's knee to listen. He slipped under Herr's mental barriers. 'I can take it from here.' she knew this story as well as She did.

He ignored her. 'The oldest son, Tyrel, was furious that his wife had been given what he considered his birthright, but he could not do anything about it. She was pregnant and if anything happened to her there would be a cry of civil war for the throne. For action.' The room sways. 'She was a good leader, the people loved her, but her husband could not take it. He beat her, she hit her head, and everyone thought she was dead. They sent her out down the Your river, it leads straight Rockville Pennsylvania.'

'Her stop at that moment at that time.' Ham's hand shook his shoulder. He hated talking about this, he hated this story because he hated the man who did that to his mother. He hated that his mother confided in him that she still has flashbacks.

He looked down at her, she pleaded silently for him to stop. He sagged and finally did.

'She did a lot of good.' Mara agrees. 'She passed a law; it is buried under years of neglect, but it is there. A woman can rule in her husband's absence.'

He nodded to what was said. She had read about that but there was something else, something was missing from that law. She bit her lip. It could just be something trivial. 'Then I can use that.' 'Let us not be rash, the rash get killed.' Sheldon raised a hand from his pillow. 'You are too smart.' He snorted.

'Sheldon must not remember the bit about you impromptu with the Natali king?'

'Probably not.' He grinned. 'And that wasn't rash.'

'Besides.' She cut in. 'We aren't sending you there alone at all.' He was a friend of her mind and a traitor to the public.

'Who says- I'll be alone.' he asks. 'Alec will be with me.' To show him, Alec yawned, baring all his teeth before flopping down in Uway's lap again.

'He wants you to scratch him.' He told Unsway helpfully.

'Ferocious indeed.' He nodded. 'It isn't enough.'

'We have time to think about it.' Neelan stood. 'Let us all think about it.'

He wanted to scream; they did not have time. There was no time left once the fire burned Median. They were out of time, they needed to act.

A hand took hers. 'Sleep on it.' Mara patted her hand. Sheldon and Dawn nodded. They would think it was best.

'Well good night.' Dawn did a graceful courtesy. He was stumped. I could not be nightfall already. No! She had hoped to be able to sneak away to the temples for a little while and relieve Rue a little.

The Elders were first, she Her, Unsway and Alec brought up the rear. The four Elders were in deep conversation ahead of them. The three of them barely spoke until Unsway veered away. 'Night all.' He waved back at him, and he disappeared.

She detoured them off into the right hall and she could no longer hear the mumbling of anything. 'Where are we going?'

'To our room.'

'He is right, we sleep down here.' Alec padded ahead. 'Mate is sleepy.' She was the only one in the group who was directionally challenged.

What did Alec mean calling Her 'mate.'? So, he was not the only one to see it. She looked tired. 'Have you slept at all?'

He squeezed her. 'Don't get accusing me.'

'He wouldn't leave your bed.' Alec told her. It thrilled her that he had stayed by her, why did Alec sound so grumpy about it?

'He wouldn't let me sleep on the bed.'

'Why are you smiling?' She asked her finally to come to their door. He opens it.

'Alec isn't happy with you.'

'You are happy that I pissed off the cat?' He raised a brow leading her in. 'What did I do?'

'You wouldn't let him sleep on the bed.' He pouted.

'No use in letting him start now, he will only break it when he gets older. See he is fine right there.' Alec had curled up right near the fire, seeming perfectly content with himself.

Someone had built a fire and left. Besides them, no one else was in the room. 'Will you stay?' His grip on her hand slackens enough to let her pull away.

'Do you want me to?' Her throat tightens and sweat breaks on her palms. She had not slept in the same room, knowingly, with Her since they were Bound.

It was too late to take the words back, they were out. She waited for him to leave or stay. She did not know what more she wanted.

'Stay.' his grip tightens again around her hand.

She had not expected him to say yes. The room suddenly felt too crowded, his hands too warm even with the block of ice swirling around her belly as he led her to the bed.

He watched him kick off his sandals and scurried to do the same as well as take the darts from her hair. Her braid slapped her back as she scrambled up into the bed scooting over to make room for her husband. What now? What did she do now?

She watched with fascination; it was a simple move. All he did was take off his vest and slide into bed, but it was the most graceful thing she had ever seen. He watched him roll to get comfortable, he slept on his side.

'Come over here.' He tried not to bristle or shiver at his words. It was easier to do the former when he said 'Please.' She scooted forward letting him roll back the covers and tuck her in. He had to feel her heart thump into his chest. She had never been so close to him like this before.

'What are you doing?' she asked bewildered when his head nuzzled into her neck. His breath tickled. She had not known what to expect but this was not it.

'Going to sleep.' he said, burying his head in her hair. He hoped she had not missed a dart. She squirmed to get comfortable, he did not let her move much else. She could not get away. He listens as his breath becomes shallow and even.

'Her?'

'Mom?'

'Why did you sleep before?' What had changed?

'You were not safe before;' his words were grumbled out. 'Nothing will happen to you here.'

Because this place was sacred? or because he knew and trusted the people here?

'Her?' He murmured. 'Her?' He was asleep. Truly sleep.

He snickered, feeling his snoring hit her jaw. She was not going to wake him even to tease him about his horrible snoring. It could wait. Over on the rug, Alec had rolled over onto his back in front of the fire. His mouth was slightly open, his pink tongue hanging over the side of his mouth. The last thing he looked at was terrifying. His tail slithers side to side every occasionally, darting into the fire and quickly away.

Between wondering if she would have a burnt kitty kit and Herr's snores, He fell asleep. Looks as though Cousin Grean has had a bit too much to drink, Westcliffe said, signaling for two footmen. get him to his carriage.

Ansley looked over to see Sheffield grinning like a loon. Finally, I will have a nonboring tale to tell, he said triumphantly. I would keep it to yourself, Sheffield, Ansley warned.

Of course, old boy. But he was fairly bouncing on the balls of his feet as he shouldered his way through the men who had gathered around at the commotion. Apologies, he said to the men. I could not let an insult to Welford go unchallenged. Drink up.

Westcliffe took Ansley's knowing that she was one of the fallen- and would reveal wings and fangs when the trust was made, and the dissented of dark-magic- and craft, the arm and led him to a distant corner of the room, Stephen following in their wake.

‘Sh-h.’

What was that all about? Westcliffe asked once they were away from prying ears. He questioned the legitimacy of Jannie's child. You must know everyone is questioning it. it does not matter. She was with child when Welford died. The courts will recognize it as his.

His words were spoken with too much vehemence. Both of his brothers were studying him as though only seeing him for the first time and as life. it is none of my concern' Westcliffe began. No, it is not, Ansley assured him.

‘His not going to become like us?’

He strode for the Palace doors trying to hold her head high, it was hard. Her world felt as though it had been flipped upside down, she did not want to tell Nevaeh or Meridian who walked beside her. They would think or know that the

Golem's poison was finally starting to affect her and take her back to the Dancer's Guild. She could not tell them, so He fixed her eyes on the walk ahead. It was not hard for Nevaeh by her side to keep her steady. 'Almost there.' Nevaeh murmured to her softly. He nodded, her body was not tired, but a dull ache began to beat in her temples and her vision sometimes blurred out of focus if she moved her head a certain way. The quicker she got Genny and Away out the better. The quicker she got everyone she cared about to safety, the better.

'Where is everyone?' He asked as she realized that Meridian, Nevaeh, and her own were the only footsteps to be heard wandering the Palace Halls. The only sounds besides that were the swishing of her Dancer's skirts that Nevaeh had fetched her. It sent chills to her spine. It reminded her of her first day coming back to the Palace after the Fire.

'Don't know.' The meridian said uneasily. 'It almost reminds me of the time when the King went missing, the whole city was placed on curfew for days.' At the same moment, Nevaeh hissed for them to hurry. They did, all of them spent for the Prison's Keep. A side staircase took them under the palace. His head ached too much to take in her surroundings. She just knew that one moment there had been sunlight pouring in through massive windows, the next their world was under the earth with only torches and mage-light to see. Rows of cells lined the left and right side of the hallway; He did not investigate any of them. Not until she heard. 'He!' It was Genny's voice. His head snapped up in its direction.

Genny's face peeped out from between the iron bars. Her face was covered with soot and dirt, a grim smile lighting her face. 'You're all right.' relief flooded He's chest when she heard Genny's voice. Unable to do more, He nodded. She was unable to bring herself to tell her that she did not have much time left. 'You shouldn't have come here, they-' He cut in before she could start to chastise her.

'Where is Away?' She demanded in a deep voice, Genny's voice stilled, her feature turning into stone. It was not hard as stone, He bet if she pushed hard enough Genny would crack to a million pieces. Conflict warred behind her dark eyes that were almost black in the sunless space. Finally, she came to a decision.

'They are trying him today.' He paled too, beside them Nevaeh and Meridian tense. His mouth went dry, and she had to close it. There was nothing she could say. 'What!' She found her voice; it was too loud. 'What could they-'

Again, there was conflict before Genny sighed. It was a small gesture that made her tragically beautiful, and then she was shaking her head. 'They think that you and he have been having an affair.' He closed her eyes to stop the space from going from black to red. They were crazy, absolutely insane. 'He?' Genny said in a tight voice. 'Everyone knows that-'

'Get her out.' He shoved her lock picks at Nevaeh knowing she knew how to use them. She did not want to hear whatever Genny had been about to say.

'Take her straight to the Guild. I will meet you there.' Nevaeh stopped her eyes narrowing on her.

'No.' Nevaeh, Genny, and Meridian glared down at her. He drew herself up to full height preparing for a battle. Goddess, they did not have time for this! She was running out of time; didn't they get it?

'I'm not giving you a choice and you don't have to come.' He tried to make her voice icy as she glared at them all. 'Go.' He ran for the exit surprised to find Meridian at her heels a moment later. Together they ran for the Council Chamber like their lives depended on it. Away's might.

Their feet were suddenly too loud and slow as they clacked on the stone floors. He burst through the ridiculously huge Council Chamber doors flanked by Meridian. As one eye turned to them, every gaze held the same expression. Shock. He glared back accusingly at the sight of her.

'What is the meaning of this!' her voice rolled through the room like quiet thunder. No one quaked in their seats, but no one moved either. Meridian put a restraining hand on His shoulder, but she violently shook him off. Anger rolled through her like magic, she wished it were magic. She would tear the walls down around them with her anger alone.

His feet carried her down the aisle towards the lone stand. Away stood behind it, his eyes bright at the sight of her but grim at the same time. At least he looked all right, dirty but not harmed. He thought.

'Lady.' The sneering voice caught her attention; she looked up to the dais and blanched. The highest Biseal sat in the King's Chair. He sat in his seat!

'Biseal.' He said with as much contempt as she could sew into that one word. Goddess, she did not like this man. 'You are in my husband's seat.' She said even when her hand grabbed Away's arm. Her fury only grew when she realized that they had chained him, and his arms were bruised and his hands bloody.

'Someone had to take lead while you were,' he coughed 'absent.' The Meridian said that the guards had chased them when they tried to remove her from the Palace. Had the Guards been trying to stop them from hurting her, or had they been about to finish off what the Golem had started? No one seemed in any hurry to arrest Meridian and he stood right next to her. They glared at him.

'I wasn't in the best of health.' He said through gritted teeth.

'How are you feeling now?' he asked, leaning forward-looking too interested. He knew without any doubt that he was the one to send that Golem. If Meridian had been telling the truth, then he was the one that had if not started the Fire, then conspired it. Maybe even tricked the apprentices into accidentally doing the spell.

'I would be better if you didn't have my Guard in chains.' She hissed at him. 'Come down from The King's Chair.'

'I was voted in for this seat.'

'It was in my absence!' He hissed back.

'My Dear, a lot has changed in your absence.' He sneered. Funny how one seat could make him think he had so much power? He shook off the fact that it had made her think the same. How stupid she had been to think she was practically untouchable.

'Would you care to fill me in then?' he asked neutrally. The Meridian had made his way to her side. Biseal spared him a disgusted look before turning back to her. The Lords, all of them seemed to shift restlessly, they had come to some decision about her, and she was to be told. Now.

'The Gods sent me a vision about you my Dear of what you really are.' he said imperiously. His stomach ached; he was lying. He had to be, there was no way a magician had visions. That was done in the temples, another reason that the two were opposite. Mages believed in magic; Priest believed in fate. He was lying his fat ass off.

'Oh, really?' He said casually, in her mind she reached for Her, her hand wrapping around her necklace. She wanted him to hear this. 'What did they tell you?'

'That you are unfit to rule as a woman. That child in your belly is a lie fabricated to keep you here. You have played your part here fairly well Lady,' there went that sneering again. 'But I have been told you did not share your husband's bed before you were taken to Natali. You were, however, alone often with- him.' he nodded towards Away. His jaw dropped open. She did not know whether to laugh or screech at his lies.

'Those are lies!' The meridian spoke when she found she could not. All He could truthfully see was red. The room swayed dangerously and for a moment she was not sure if it was the poison taking hold of her finally or if it was her rage. Maybe if she screamed and lunged at him the poison would pour from her mouth and fingertips into his worthless lying form while she strangled him! Her fingers twitched to try.

'This is treason!' He shook her head, unable to stand, not being able to simply slit his throat. 'Away is a friend, a trustworthy friend that has guarded me and my reputation better than anyone in this room can boast!'

'I'm sure he guarded you,' Biseal coughed. 'Very well. Adultery of The Lady is an act of treason as well.' Biseal said just as easily. She could not believe it. The room sat in anticipatory silence. No one was aiding Biseal in case He got the upper hand. No one wanted to lose their throat for treason. They were not going to help her either. Somehow Biseal had gotten to every member of the Court. She was on her own. Goddess, she wished Alec were with her.

'You've already tried to kill my child.' He found her tongue. 'I was not here because I was attacked right outside of the Goddess's temple in the palace. That was black magic! Is that the will of the Goddess as well?' He sneered wondering what he was to say. 'Or is it just your will in the God's name.'

He was so sure he had him. He did not even blink. 'A Foreigner harps of foreign tales of Black magic and Lies.' His mouth dropped. At that moment she saw all the hate that he had held back. Hate mixed with something else that made her skin shiver. Lust?

'I am not.'

'Then why are you not dead?' he asked, sitting back waiting for her to amuse him. There was a murmuring agreement from the Lords. He turned to glare at them. All but a few glared boldly back.

'Because I am a mage.' He told them, holding her head high. It was not a lie; she had a theory that it was the only reason her mind had not completely turned into meaninglessness.

'He doesn't-' Away began but He silenced him with a wave of her hand.

'Mage?' Biseal said skeptically, his beady eyes looking over her. 'I think not.'

'I know so.' He stood proud. 'I'm a Truthteller.' The room erupted into laughter. Even Biseal chuckled in his snorting laughter. He glared at him. 'It is true,'

'Show me?' Biseal asked-

'He, don't.' Away began. He shut him up with a glare. She was doing this for him, to get him out; he did not need to know that she was already doomed. He was not telling her not to say anything for fear of them knowing she was a mage but because he knew what she was going to say.

she took a deep breath and told him. 'I haven't felt my magic since I put out The Fire.' A rumble of comments rippled around her. Even Meridian shot her a funny look, a skeptical one but still shocked. 'I- I don't know when it will return.' She held up her hands in a helpless shrug that left Biseal purple. His head was purple; it reminded her of a pimple that needed to be popped. He took a step forward and was snatched back. Meridians wrapped his arm around her shoulders pulling her close to his side jostling her. He blinked, Biseal's face was normal again. It was red, not purple and it did not look like a pimple but damn if she would not like to squish it anyway. Especially when he said.

'You are a dirty little liar that was never for the good of Ysterym. You are the reason the Gods have forsaken us. You are the reason our King has fled. It is... You; it has always been you!' His mouth feels open. 'You are the Black Omen upon Ysterym. Nothing will be put right until we do it.' Behind her, there was a murmur of agreement.

'But- I,' words failed her as her knees turned weak. For once she was speechless. Instead, her hands slipped into Meridian's pocket pulling out the picks she had begged him to find. The room fell into an eerie silence. Away just looked at her in shock. Everyone else looked nervous.

'Are you completely off your head?' She heard Meridian say with a quiver in his voice. 'She is the Queen, no matter what you think she has done. It does not make it true! There were bad omens in Ysterym long before she came and will be here long after we go to our graves. You are a fool!' He wanted to cheer. Instead, she hedged away from Meridian. He knew what he was doing and silently thanked him. This meeting had shot to hell quickly, they needed out. He slowly inched towards Away who stood in horror and rage as he looked at Biseal. Like he wanted the man's throat. Gods, He had never wanted anything so bad.

His hands firmly gripped Away's wrist, after she did this they had to be prepared to run. She looked at Away. He nodded; his face determined. She had to remember to tell him that Nevaeh had gotten Genny out before he went off to look for her. The picks turned in the lock with an audible click. He winced even as the shackles fell into her hands from Away's wrist.

'Seize her!' He flew backward behind the protective stances of the two men. The Meridian tucked her safe against his back as he whirled around to hear the sound of sliding swords. Despite herself, He was intrigued by them. They were different than any sword she had ever seen. The blade instead of being straight and

pointed, the were sickled with a blade's edge for a tip. 'Take her in, all of them in for the use of Black magic against Ysterym and treason against the king's name!'

'No!' He gripped Meridian's arm. She looked at Away, he did not have chains shackling him, but he was in no condition for a fight. The meridian was too exhausting to fight. He did not want to fight them. She simply wanted Biseal's head to roll.

'There isn't another way out.' The Meridian hissed. His belly rolled. She knew there wasn't.

'Do you have a weapon.' when he did nothing but look at her, He cursed before belatedly realizing she did not have a dagger on her either.

'Grab Her, get her!' The first guard charged them. He easily dodged his stupid attempt at them.

Meridian grabbed his swords as He kicked him down to the ground. Her foot rolled him over to his side. Just in time to trip the next guards charging them. Somehow Meridian fought off two, three, until away was able to pick up the sword and help. He was tucked in close beside Meridian. Away stuck near her open side. He could not believe that their duo was fending off a troop.

It was obvious that Meridian was a sword's man he held his weapon like it was a part of his arm. Away was an assassin and held his own. Both kept their bodies in front of He as though they were her breathing armor. She watched in awe

as Away stabbed a nearby guard that had tried to do the same. Rushing forward He raided him for weapon's praying silently to the Goddess to forgive them all, and herself. She came out with a short dagger and a sword that she was only moderately trained to use.

'Thank you.' Away easily nicked the sword out of her hand as he twirled into another fight. They were still progressively moving forward towards the huge Council doors.

'Hey-' He wished she had thought not to distract them. A trio rushed her friends at once, each taking them in a different direction. One left, the other right, and one came at the front and center. Meridian sliced through the first one while away hacked back the second. The third rushed past them right for He, his blade aimed for her chest.

'He!' Away tried to trip the guard but was forced to engage another guard who had rushed forth. His eyes widened as her body reacted, twisting into itself. He twirled out the way slamming into Away's side as her hand that held the dagger lashed out. She felt it connected with something hard yet soft and sink in. She squealed as the guard went down; a fresh spurt of blood flowed from a side wound. By the Goddess, they were painting the Council Room red. No one moved to interfere, to help, they were completely alone. He rubbed her head, a serious pain tingled along her spine and up into her head.

'Princess!' He jumped, looking up at the dais where the King sat. She could have wept.

'She?' He nearly dropped her knife in a burst of joy at seeing him there. He would set everyone to right. By the look on his face, no one here today would pay for what they were doing.

'He waits!' He ignored Away's arms; he did not understand that they were saved. She would help them straighten this whole thing out.

He picked up her Dancer's skirts as she ran for the dais dogging around the fallen bodies of the guards. She had to make it back to the dais where She was. He stood tall looking down at her, a grim smile spread on his face that made her want to hug him even more. She just needed to get to him.

'She!' He reached out for him as she ascended the steps. He reached for her snatching her forward with a force that made He gasp. The momentum slammed her forward into a solid chest, she could have cried out.

'Goddess, I've missed you.' He said on the verge of tears. She wanted to cry and scream. He wanted to kiss Her for coming home at last and not leaving her with this mess. She looked up into his scowling face as he looked out at the Lords.

'I know Princess, never again I swear.' He hugged her tightly. 'Give me the dagger.' He reached for it. He hesitated.

'I-'

'Heania.' Her voice became stern. 'Give me the dagger.' His hands took it from her fingers while she tried to decide whether she should hand it to him or not.

He sputtered up at him about to give him a piece of her mind, but she was twirled around to face the Lords. Why were Away and Meridian still fighting? Didn't they see that She was home, they could stop? Her mouth opened to yell for Away or Meridian before something sharp nicked into her neck. The world stopped, He froze, like a blade bit into her skin. It was her blade- why would She press a dagger to her throat?

'Don't say a word or I will slice you open.' The words made her shudder at their coldness, she meant it. He was going to kill her.

'The baby-' He began-

'That bastard can die with you.' He head-butted him; it must have stunned him because She roared as he stumbled back, the blade pressed dangerously into her neck. He gulped but must have cried out because Away and Meridian turned to her as one. Both stood stunned as she felt. What was going on?

'She?' He asked tentatively-

'No Darling,' The voice sounded like She. He shut her eyes against his words, he had told her no. He must have been telling the truth, she never called her

Darling. 'Drop your weapons.' He was not speaking to her; He guessed he spoke to Away and Meridian. She winced when both did so without hesitation.

'Don't you hurt her.' Meridian started through clenched teeth as if that would somehow remove the blade from her throat.

'I cannot hurt the dying.' She heard a soft murmur in her ear. It made her shudder. 'You are dying aren't you, Darling?' He wanted to shake her head but ended up just shaking, period. It earned her a cruel laugh. 'Seize them!'

'No!' His words broke through her haze. This was not happening, not again. Please Goddess let this be some horrible dream. He prayed with her eyes wide open as she lunged forward the blade sliced into her throat creating a shallow cut. He barely noticed the hot slice of pain. 'Let them go! Please!' Guards rushed the two men; she saw their weapons being kicked out of grabbing distance. Two guards stood on either side of Away and Meridian as they tied her friend's hands behind their backs. This could not be happening, but it was. She was letting this happen- he was doing it! He thought fast.

'You can't.' He started louder and more confidently than she could have ever thought possible.

'Away is under diplomatic immunity, if you touch him, you risk a war with Natili. We cannot afford a new ally to become an old foe. It is not Meridian's fault, I threatened to take away his land and title if he did not help me. You have no

reason to hold them here, banish them and be done with it.' She frowned but shrugged.

'If you keep fighting to get her not only, will I kill her outright, but you will also both hangs.' Both men stopped their advancement. The room rustled finally; the Lords broke out into wild murmuring. He would outrightly kill the Queen. He heard bits or what they were saying. 'Still, she might be telling the truth, there might be a child.' She turned them out again to favor Meridian and Away who was eying her stubbornly. If they stayed any longer, they would do something rash that would get them killed. They had to go.

'Go my Lords; you're both dismissed from my service.' He said as Queen as she could. Her legs felt as though they would buckle, her whole body just wanted to explode from frustration and anger. This was unfair, it was not right, it- a flash of pure hit struck her body, and she felt her magic boil up out of pure frustration. He reached for it desperately only to feel it retreat. Frustrated tears pricked her eyes, she blinked them away quickly.

Neither of the men moved. He frowned. 'Guards!' She called while pleading with them both. 'See that Lord Away and Lord Meridian make it safely outside the palace walls.' She said watching more guards come forward to flank them. 'No harm will come to them.' He said as menacingly as possible.

'No harm will come to them.' The guard, the lead guard, decided when he took a stance before her. His eyes glittered with a look He did not understand,

anger? Was he angry that he had to obey her? His lips were pinched tight as he gave a curt nod to his team. The Meridian and away were dragged from the room. He winced when they struggled.

Two weeks had passed, and Jannie's lethargy seemed to worsen. She could not seem to decipher her feelings regarding Welford or Ansley. The only feelings she truly trusted were those she felt for the baby. She knew she should return to Herndon Hall, but she seemed unable to work up the energy needed to order the servants.

With her elbow resting on the sill, and her chin propped in her hand, she sat at the window in her bedchamber gazing out at what she could see of Rockville at night. Which was not much. Trees blocked her view of the street. She saw the lighted drive but knew it would still be empty. The Duchess of Greystone was hosting a ball this evening. It was always well attended, so Jannie knew no one would call that evening.

Following the interment, the men returned to the residence. Adhering to the custom that women did not attend funerals, the society matrons waited with Jannie in the front parlor. As Ansley passed by on his way to taking the men to the library for libations, he caught sight of Jannie with women sitting around her, his mother holding her hand. Her pale pallor concerned him. He wanted to lift her into his arms and carry her upstairs to her bedchamber, away from the madness.

Instead, he pushed forth to the library, where footmen had already begun pouring drinks for the guests. When all had a glass in hand, Ansley lifted his and an expectant hush filled the room.

To Welford. He was courageous in all things, met all of life's challenges head-on. You will be missed, old friend. hear! Hear!

As Ansley downed the whiskey, Lord Sheffield said, at least we can all be assured that there will be fox hunting when we join him. I daresay, he will see to it that all is put to rights in that regard.

Another toast followed, more whiskey was swallowed, and quiet conversation and laughter ensued as the men began to reminisce about Welford. Ansley wandered over to where Westcliffe and Stephen were talking. Now that he knew the truth of their parentage, it amazed him that he had not suspected it before. Westcliffe was dark-haired, like his sire, and Stephen was blond, fair as a summer afternoon. Westcliffe's eyes were deep Black, almost black, and Stephen's was blue with lines within.

The arrangements for Welford were nicely made, Stephen said quietly.

Ansley nodded, distracted by the man he had spotted nearby talking with Lord Sheffield. Do my eyes deceive me or is that my cousin Green Demure talking with Sheffield?

Both his brothers looked discreetly in the direction Ansley had shown. I would say so, yes, Westcliffe murmured. He is next in line for Welford's title, isn't he? quiet. Does he look to be a man going mad with syphilis?

Westcliffe and Stephen both looked at him as though he were the one going mad. Had Welford lied about that as well? Damn him! The man was turning out to be an expert manipulator. I think I will have a word. But getting there meant running the gauntlet of those who wished to offer their condolences. It was no secret that he and Welford had been close. So, he graciously acknowledged the kind words that were spoken as he wended his way toward his target. He was not there when he heard Sheffield say, ...bated breath to discover if Lady Welford would deliver a son.

I do not know if the courts will care one way or the other. My cousin was paralyzed. If he gets her with a child, I will eat my hat. shall I fetch it for you? Ansley asked.

Grean jerked around so quickly that the whiskey in his glass nearly sloshed over the sides.

cousin. You are not on the branch of the tree that is in line for the title so perhaps you have not given it any thought. But you have. If you are wise, you will hold your tongue on the matter. Is that a threat? It is a promise. Lady Welford has suffered enough during the past few years, and she deeply mourns the passing of her husband. That does not mean he got her with a child. I have heard rumors that

you danced with her, that you were seen walking alone with her in the garden. As a favor to Welford, I attended to her where he could not. does that include her bed?

His fist shot up so fast that the pain was ricocheting from his knuckles to his shoulder before he even realized he had delivered the blow to Grean's chin. His cousin dropped to the floor with an unceremonious thud. Completely out. He was not going to get up any time soon.

Westcliffe and Stephen were instantly at Ansley's side.

The room was closing in. If she reached out both her hands, she could push them apart. He clenched her easily at her side pushing away the crazy thoughts. The walls were not closing in, it was all in her head.

'Lady?' He shook her head, staring off Aisling's advance to help. The woman missed nothing and the way He had been glaring at her confines was not missed. She just could not help it, she refused to go back to sleep. Not while Genny and Away sat in the Purgatory, goddess this was such a mess. Worse, all of this was her fault.

'I need a favor, Aisling-' He licked her lips wishing she could think of another way. 'You're a healer in the palace, but you're a Dancer.'

'It isn't officially known that I'm a Dancer.' Aisling said warily. He paused and said that made sense. In the palace Dancers were not particularly trusted. It was for the best that it was not known that Aisling was one.

'Are there other dancers in the palace, ones that I don't know of?' he asked unsurely. There had to be, she refused to believe that the Guild would be content to sit in the eyes of the palace and not have spies looking out for Her or for the Guild itself.

'There are a few I know and a lot more I don't.' Aisling had been hard at work writing down something in her small book. Her pen stroked in fast scrawls across the sheet until He looked away afraid that she would lose her focus and slip away into another nightmare. 'I will see what I can find out for you.' She watched Aisling stand and walk to the exit.

He shivered; she could withstand a lot of things but not another nightmare. Thank the Goddess that she had her sanity, for now. After the last dream, He was not sure how she could trust it anymore. What if this was a dream too? She could not take falling in and out of dreams, maybe if she pinched herself- ouch! Well, it hurt like this was real.

'Lady?' Aisling's concerned tone crept in on her musing. He quickly hid her arm where her pinch had already started to bruise.

'Can you contact someone?' he asked quickly. 'I want to know what is going on.' She needed to get Aisling away from her too.

'I cannot-'

'What of Monroe then?' He asked, trying to find something to get her. Aisling's face clouded, telling her all she needed to know. There was something between Monroe and Aisling, a friendship hopefully.

'I don't want him there alone- my protection for him means nothing if I'm not there to enforce it.' Aisling frowned.

'You and the heir are more important.' Aisling said bravely, He wanted to shake her.

'Aisling, we're dying!' She hated to see the healer flinch. 'You said it yourself- nothing can be done but to wait for lucidity to leave me, from the inside, out, right? I want the people I care about to be safe, please.' She knew she had the healer when her shoulders drooped. Her formidable form shook in deep tremors. He rushed quickly to hug her; she hated being so harsh. So blunt. 'Please?' She begged.

It felt like an eternity passed before Aisling sighed, it said everything she wanted to know. 'Thank you!' He hugged her tightly.

'I'll be back before noon,' Aisling said briskly pulling away. 'You're not to leave this room.'

'Yes,' He nodded, crossing her fingers behind her back as if she were a child. They used to pull this when they were children. Crises crossed my lies got lost.' she muttered over her shoulder. She knew that it was still early morning

before the sun had even stirred. There was time yet she just had to- 'Princess?' He jumped at the voice as if her very thoughts had summoned this phantom voice.

'Oh, thank the Goddess!' The voice was exuberant. It was also defiantly male. He wanted to cry; the poison was setting in early. She was becoming delusional. By the stars, she was sitting in a cell with a babysitter thinking that her husband was speaking to her.

'But I am speaking to you Heania.' Her voice said happily. 'My Heania.' he added in an afterthought.

'Gods are too cruel.' He said slumping down onto her bed. Aisling gave her one more stern stare before departing from the room. He sighed watching her leave. She had been making the feeling so much worse. She was sitting in a cell waiting to die, just brooding. He curled up into herself to stare at the wall with the flickering flames. 'I see you in Her arms, now I'm hearing you-'

'Of course, you hear me, you are wearing the talisman I gave you. He does not you remember?' His hands flew into her shirt feeling for the signet resting against her breast. Her fingers clutched it so hard she felt its imprint embedding into her skin.

'I didn't.' She admitted solemnly.

'It does not matter- I heard you scream. He you made my heart stop.' Her voice became tight. 'Where are you?' His questions came in a tirade that demanded

answers. He took a deep breath, she could just see him sitting, his leg shaking with impatience as he forced everything else to stay still. She smiled.

'I am in the Guild, Nevaeh, Aisling, Genny, and Away smuggled me out. Meridian did as well.'

'I'm so glad.' He sounded so glad. 'You and the baby are safe.' for now.

'Yes,' He wheedled, she had to tell him the truth, but she was reluctant to intrude upon his happiness. 'Genny and Away were caught and taken to the purgatory.'

'For keeping you safe?' He said clearly, believing that she was wrong. She wished that she were wrong.

'The Golemn got me.' she could not spare him that detail. 'They found me outside the temples and tried to get me out- I think someone alerted the Guards because they thought I was being kidnapped. Everyone that saved me is a traitor of the Crown.' The Median was going to explode when they heard this tomorrow. The Queen had disappeared not once but twice.

'It said your name?' She spoke when it became impossible to stay silent.

'Yes.' He shook, remembering the bleakness of the whole thing. 'It pierced my chest. She said, 'I am not going to make it that long,' the words caught

in her throat. Instead, she said. 'I need your help.' she told him after a moment after she realized she could not say the stuff in the middle.

'I'm on my way home, Princess I swear to you-'

'I need Mican's help- She we aren't strong enough to fight this.' His voice tightened. 'Goddess, I don't even have my magic to help me-' He stopped mid-speech a thought in her mind forming that was so ridiculous that it might work. 'She, did Mican get that necklace off?'

'No.' he was firm. He did not care, one way or another he was coming home.

'Do you think he could do a spell that would give me my magic back?' She asked slowly, there was a pause in the air that told her that he had stopped whatever task he had been doing. 'She I feel like such a fool.' This had to be the answer, it had been there the whole time.

'I will ask him but enough is enough, I will be home within two days.' It took five horseback to reach Median from the Bud border. That was without a raiding party and with a fast horse.

'The Golemn's poison will set in by high noon. I have a lot to do between now and then.' He frowned; she had a couple of hours. Half a day at most. She would not leave her friends in the Purgatory; she would not allow Meridian's name to be tarnished. 'Aisling told me if I am lucky then high noon is it.'

'I will ask Mican; He I will be home before anything else happens to you. Just rest, when you open your eyes, I will be home.' He wanted to argue that the last time she closed her eyes she dreamed that Nevaeh had taken her place. She could not get those words out either.

'That sounds lovely.' He said instead of forcing cheerfulness she did not feel. Her whole body was strung tight but numb to all pain. Being told she had less than a day to set everything in the right direction went beyond everything.

'It is true. I will be home in no time, with a cure.' He was sure there was nothing for her to do but believe him. He sounded so confident; it was more to assure her than anything.

'I believe you.' he said softly.

'Good so I want my girls to just rest until I get back, swear.' he demanded of her.

'I'm not a Truth-teller anymore.' He smiled a bit. 'And stop calling it a girl.' she snapped because she had to. Not letting She have his way on everything was a luxurious pleasure.

'I do not care- do not take on everything by yourself when you do not have to. Let the Guild take care of you. u she is her because that is the way it is. Get used to it Love.' He made a face knowing arguing now was futile.

'They take care of me because- of you.' He shook her head surprised to hear Her snort.

'They would kill me to save you, He. Haven't you heard the stories going on about you? The Dancer's Queen. The Queen that builds her city with her people, the stories that have reached you are inspiring.' the awe in She's voice dumbfounded her. She had barely been out of her room since it was discovered she was pregnant. 'Those people care about you because they love you.' So there, deal with it, you are loved.

He clenched her jaw unsure how to deal with what he was telling her. 'I don't know how to feel about that, I'll worry about it later- She I need your help for something else now.' He sketched out her half-formed plan of how she planned to get Genny and Away out of Purgatory. Aisling might have known people in the Guild but there was no way to know if any of them could help. There was not any time to wait or lose, she had till noon.

She listened to her, heard her out before he told her what he knew. 'Why do you need to know?'

'So-o, I can give the information to someone to help get them out.' He told him easily. It was only a half-lie. He did not have to know that she had every intention of breaking them out.

-And-

After another tight silence, she told her the rest of everything she needed to know. Including a secret way of escaping out of the Guild. She felt horrible by the end. When he made her promise not to do anything stupid, she had to do another Crisscrossed lie that got lost. She told him that she would not. Their goodbye was and 'I love you.' She would never see him again if she could not stop the poison. It was all on her.

'Lady?' He jumped a small smile lit her face as she saw Nevaeh take hesitant steps toward her, Meridian a couple behind her. Both looked so tired He wanted to shove them into the nearest seat.

'Sit, sit.' He waved them into seats if she was going to do this, she needed their help. Even Meridian's if he had helped her out the Guild then maybe she had been wrong in suspecting him all along, Nevaeh too. The two of them had been unconsciously high on her list of suspects even though she and Nevaeh had become close friends. At least she had not had to track them down, they had come to her.

'Lady.' The Meridian nodded cautiously, his normally smooth face was handsome and clean cut. Right then he just looked so exhausted. He wanted nothing more but to give him her blanket and tell him to rest. 'Forgive me for not getting to you sooner.' His brows knitted together in confusion. Her face was the mirror of Nevaeh's.

'I don't-'

'I should have warned you sooner and I did not, for that I am sorry'

'Meridian.' He said slowly unsure what she could say. 'Be blunt with me.'

She liked to blunt it did not give her time to be filled with dread, doom or despair.

It all just hit at once leaving you to catch up.

His face twisted as though he would be sick before stealing into weary features. 'I've known this was going to happen- not that you were going to be attacked that night, but I knew it was to come.' so they had been plotting her attack for some time? He had to have seen it coming, she had and ignored it. It had been stupid to deny that it could happen. She had been foolish, now this was the price.

'Are you telling me now because you know the price for treason? Or because you think it will not matter?' She would be dead by noon high without her magic, it was the only thing that she was assured.

'I know what treason means.' He said stiffly. 'And you do matter, your life matters to me and it was foolish to think I could stave off your attack like I did.' He did not know if she believed him or not. He could just be telling her this now so she would see that he had mercy. Or he could be telling the truth. 'I've seen what you've done even with everyone trying to hinder you, myself included.' He and Nevaeh exchanged glances. 'I would like to see what other changes you can make.'

'Even though I'm a woman?' He could not help her sarcasm. From the first time she met Meridian he had not done anything to hide what he thought of a woman's capabilities.

'It is a pleasure to say I have met a few exceptions to my philosophy. I want everything you can offer Median for Defama.' the spoke of his lands. He wanted to ask what made him think he would be allowed to keep them but did not feel sure enough to taunt him in that way.

'Tell me everything.' He sat forth; Meridian's eyes widened when he realized she was dressed in a simple shift- a nightdress. His eyes quickly glanced away. He snorted; the women of Ysterym wore less going about their daily routines. What made her so different?

'There is a lot to confess Lady.' He said simply. She had to ask then, fine.

'Who started the fire?' That was the most important. If she did nothing else before she died, she wanted whoever did it dead.

'The University.' The meridian spoke without hesitation. He sat back stung. So, he knew, he had truly known all this time!

'I've only just found out about it through the ears I have, just like everyone else.' he said quickly.

'You should be ashamed!' He snapped. 'Goddess, do you know how many people died! Homes and families that need justice-' He looked away disgusted only to turn back to him with a glare. 'That's inexcusable!' At least he had the decency to look ashamed. 'Why?' Why was the city burned, there was not a good enough reason for it, but she had to know.

'Ysterym is a delicate balance of powers, Lady.' The Meridian murmured. 'The Gods temples, the Crown, the Guilds. As King, she represented all.' He frowned. 'He is the Crown as king, the king is appointed by the Gods, and he is a known figure head in all the main Guilds. He is all.'

'Where does that leave the University?' Nevaeh asked curiously. It was the first time she had spoken in a while.

'Don't be fooled lady,' Meridian spoke to Nevaeh but did not look up. 'The University is a Guild too; they just choose to distance themselves. The Temples could be considered Guilds...but since it is the Gods, they are separate.' He nodded, still confused. 'The University feels superior because they have magic. A gift given to them by no other than the Gods- they think they are gods. That is what rumors are saying. Biseal believes he is a godly deity.' Meridian's voice held as much contempt for the man as He felt. 'He had even been an advisor to King She, he was restationed a season before you came into our court Lady.' He jumped, which surprised her. She would have thought Biseal was too high and mighty but

then the position did suit him. He would be in power to influence a King. He would never turn that down.

'Why did he step down?' he asked curiously.

'Oh, he did not. King She...retired him.'

'Why would he do that?' He asked, she knew she knew nothing but now was her chance to snatch answers. She had to take it. Even when it was taking up her precious time.

'Because Biseal didn't want the Crown to be tainted with foreign blood.' He rocked back as though she had been slapped or kicked. She could have thought of multiple things but never that.

'I remember something like that.' Nevaeh frowned looking at He. 'She threw him out the door. Nothing was going to change his mind about bringing you here.' He waited to hear traces of resentment and found none. Nevaeh looked at her in open honesty. 'I forgot about that He, I am sorry. I know that being dismissed did not sit well with Biseal. He has been known to have a temper.' The Meridian nodded.

Shaking her head, she wanted Meridian to tell her more. He was spellbound as she listened in horror to what he said next. 'It started the moment She disappeared. You could just feel it stirring. The University started chirping about

the displeasure the Gods had for the King for taking a foreign wife- one with no power to match his own at that.' His eyes shut but she listened on.

'The fact that you did not carry his brand did not help. They insisted the Gods were not pleased. The Temples were not swayed to believe what the University said. The Danceer's Guild was quick defending you both. When you both went missing it became increasingly hard to leave the Gods out of it. You were gone for so long it was hard to tell what rumors the cities were and what the University started.' What Biseal started. He thought icily.

'We all tried to ignore it, but we couldn't when the fire started.' Meridian's words did not sit right with her. Someone had to have known something. Fires did not just start, they were set. 'We didn't know anything about it until we heard it roaring.' By then no one could have stopped it, it burned wild and free untamed, unchecked. Only by divine interference.

'By then there was nothing you could have done.' He said numbly. 'By the time I made it back Median was blazing- nothing would have helped.' except her magic. He thought he was feeling sick. If she and she had returned a moment or worse a day later, so much more would have been lost.'

'Except the divine power the Gods bestowed upon the University.' Nevaeh's voice was faint. He spared her a glance, finding her flushed with her lips pinched tight in anger. He wondered if she looked similar, about to burst into anger.

'Of course, they would have been there to pick up the pieces- to save the day.' The meridian said with disgust. Again, He could not tell if he was faking it. He was still trying to claim what was not his or anyone is except Her's. Did he think he could get a crown out of this, by telling her?

A grim smile touched his lips and finally, he looked up at her. He found no comfort. 'Then you came back, out of the smoke. Out of nowhere you come in and your Guardian roars fear back into everyone's hearts. Making demands- without your husband.' He chuckled a little. 'You were a remarkable sight when you announced you were pregnant- with all the healers backing your claim. There was no chance of dethroning you- everyone knew it.' Biseal knew it too. He did not want foreign blood mixing with the Crown, you and She having a baby was his worst dream come true.

'So, they sent the Golemn to attack me?' he asked incredulously.

'Attack you- and the child.' He agreed. 'I can't say it was the University who sent it Lady, there are a lot of people, powerful people who wish to see you dead.' He flinched. 'There are a lot of people who feel the same way Biseal does.' that bloodlines should not be mixed.

'Well, if you are finding-up with being against me,' He licked her lips trying to find a way to effectively bottled up her anger. 'I want you to help me.'

'I was always-' He raised a hand, and he went quiet.

'You didn't immediately come forth, you waited until it was too late.' she told him. 'I nearly died, that is against me!' her voice turned hard as it rose higher. 'Now, are you going to help me or are you going to stay here and explain to Aisling and the Elders where I've gone.'

The Meridian did not miss a moment. 'I'll follow you.' She turned to Nevaeh who was fighting her own battle with her anger.

'I'm with you.' she said, her deep brown gaze burned into He's sight and she looked away. They were both too angry for words.

He nodded relieved. She had hoped they would say that. 'Good, here is what I need you two to do.'

~*~

Honor told her the coast was clear, after a day of resting and endless fussing and snarling (the latter on Ham's part.) the other women had finally taken pity on her. As well they should. Alec grumbled but did not try to keep her confined.

He slipped out of her room and went away. She was free for the first time in what felt like forever. Free of the constant fussing and naps and growls for her to wake and eat when all she wanted to do was sleep through oblivion. Someone was always with her, mostly Her growling at her to not even think about making a run for the door. She would not dream of it she knew he had locked it.

-And-

When she woke for the first time truly, she had not been there like before. It was for the best; he was always arguing with her about eating or drinking. What did it matter, there were people outside these walls that had not had a meal in days?

He headed in the direction Alec had sent her, this time with him at her heels. Towards the little room that led out into the city, she was going to visit the temples again and see if she could snoop around the palace grounds a little more.

He turned around the last corner so lost in thought she smacked into a wall. 'Where are you going?' He cursed; it was worse than a wall. It was the Heir's chest.

She stood walking with another man Him did not recognize. He was tall and young-looking.

Possibly a few years older than she was. His hair was red Him marveled at it. She liked him instantly. 'Himalia, this is Unsway. An old friend of mine. We trained together.' He nodded smiling up at the other man, she got distracted by his smile. It was handsome and sweet. Herr's arms snaked around her, and she did not let go.

'Now back to what I was asking earlier.' He tugged her. 'Where were you going?'

'Out.' she moved around him only to be snagged and two men blocking her way. He growled. He growled back, then Alec growled hissing for them all to back away from her. Anyway, tumbled over himself to put distance between them. She did not move.

'Not so fast Love, Mara wants to speak to you and a couple of the Elders are eager to meet you.'

Planting her feet, Him looked between the two men. 'Why is that?' She should have known he would never let her keep her balance. When he tugged, she flew forward, his head rested on top of hers. 'Because you are the only one who has been outside these walls in days. you my insolent one is the only one who has been to the palace.' he chewed on that. He felt him growl in disapproval. 'They want to speak to the woman who stopped the fire?' Ham's gut twisted; she had not felt her magic since.

Instead, she turned in Herr's grip to Unsway surprised to find him watching them. A bemused look plastered his face. Her face felt hot from the temple to below her chin. When she ducked her head, he chuckled.

'It isn't as though I know more than they do.' He grumbled upset that she had gotten flustered. She took her hand and began the walk.

'I have no doubt, but they shall not tell me a thing until they know how you are doing. They want you to sit in on these meetings.'

'Are you using me?' She glared at her husband and when he did not answer she turned to him anyway. 'Doesn't it sound like he is using me?'

'Yep.' Anyway, dodged Herr's swing, dancing out of the way delicately.

'Don't be mean to him.' He chastises. 'So, you really need me.' her smile grew as she watched Her pale and shuffle away from her. 'I like them already.' He told Her feeling smug. Finally, people who knew how it should be. She seriously needed to follow the lead on this. Beside them, Unsway chuckled under his breath. He could not help but look at him again. He was tall, a little shorter than her. Lean and corded with tightly compressed muscle he showed off unintentionally. Like Her, he wore nothing but the customary Dancer's vest and long pants and sandals.

His footsteps were never heard, ever. He wonders how much practice it took to walk without sound. She and unsway made it look so graceful, simple even. One dancer to her left and one to her right. He had an escort down the halls to wherever they decided to take her.

'Where is everyone?' he asked, feeling the coolness of the hall's snake over her skin. She never saw anyone in the halls. On rare occasions, she came across one or two, they were always quick on their way.

'Most of them left.' Anyway, murmured down to her.

'Why would they do that?'

'The fire scared many of them. Others have family they wished to go check on, they will be back. Others were sent to send word to the other Guilds. This location is not a large one, there were never many of us here to begin with. Six dozen at one time at most. Except during celebrations and holidays.'

He nodded. 'Why didn't the fire scare you away?' He glanced down at her, wondering why she was asking so many questions. He did not seem bothered by it; she would keep asking even after he was.

'Do you think I frighten easily?' He stood tall and bold, puffing out his chest as they continued down the hall.

'He's shyer than a mouse.' she interjected.

'Am not!' Anyway, she glared over her head.

'You nearly peed yourself over him.' He jerked his thumb at Alec trailing at Ham's heels. Anyway, I looked down and shuddered.

'Braver men would have soiled themselves trying to get away from that-'

'Alec.' He put it in gently. 'His name is Alec.'

Anyway, I nodded, winking at her. 'To get away from Alec.' He nodded and they walked on.

'Him!' Mara was the first to greet her, the older woman walked forward to greet them the instant they stepped into the room. The older woman's arms

wrapped around Him pulling her away from Her and she found herself clasping her back. In the short while she was in the man Mystery guild, she liked the Mara. The small woman was stronger than she looked, and much sharper tongued than her sweet appearance let on. Her silver rope of hair was a deception, and her small form was all show.

'Mara.' He let go but Mara held tight to her shoulders pushing her back.

'You look different.' she mused; He watched the calculations run through the back of her dark eyes. 'Happier.'

He did not know what to tell her, she was incredibly happy. It had been until she came back here to find cinder instead of houses. 'What is going on?' He remembered that there were more people in the room beside them. They stood at Mara's back patiently waiting. He noted there were two women and one man. The Elders.

One woman was a native, the other two she could not place.

'We were hoping you would be able to shed a small light on that.' the native woman closest to Mara came forward. She was tall and slender, age lines etched into her face, and the hand she extended in greeting. He took it marveling at how her skin glowed in the mage light.

'Princess, the is Dawn.' She easily stepped in. 'Dawn is an Elder of the Guild here in Median.'

He said this with obvious pride. Do not be fooled by the Nana facade was what He got out of his words.

'Dawn this is Queen Himalia, my wife.' He again marveled at how much pride he said that with. He had never spoken of her like that before, she liked it.

Sharp brown eyes cut her attention back to the woman in front of her. He was right, He tried not to squirm under the barely had scrutiny. Beside her, Alec growled pressing himself to her knee.

'We've heard a lot about you.' Dawn finally smiled, changing her face completely. The last two elders stepped forward.

'Mara loves to talk about you and you're singing.' The man raised his hand, and He took it. He was stocky and packed in a way that should have made his movement heavy. They did not, he was just as graceful as any dancer. He did not smile like Dawn and Mara did. He did not try to hide his scrutiny. 'Is it true you fell off the stage?' She winces.

She saved her from answering. 'Him, this is Sheldon and Neelan of Median-'

'Formerly of Rockville.' Neelan put it in. He nodded, that explained it.

Neelan was tall too. Taller than Sheldon by several inches, her eyes were brown and doe-like. She sucked a lot of people in that way. 'Welcome.' He nodded.

'Nice to meet you all.'

'Enough formality.' Mara waved them off. 'Merry met my sister.' They all moved away settling on the pillows circling the room. He was alone standing in a room of Elders.

Alec purred, rubbing against her leg before a warm presence pulled her back. Anyway, I nudged her shoulder before settling onto a pillow. That left one for them. He settles in letting Her draw her back into his lap. Without thinking about it He tapped at his mental barriers. He let her in. Does this mean you are not mad with me anymore?' He did not answer her, not right away. He never spoke, his mind felt like a hand caressing over her own. Soft and intimate, warm-

Sheldon cleared his throat. Four elders, Unsway and Alec, all watched them. All amused.

'Pay attention.' Alec flopped down at her thigh laying his head-on Uway's lap. The man tensed but reached his hand out to stroke her kit's head.

'Start from the beginning.' Mara encouraged. He did, describing all that she could remember about being taken from what happens in Kraal to how they got out. No one so much as blinked when she told them of walking through an iron gate and turning invisible. When He got to the fire it all changed.

'That was you!' Neelan squeaked. He ducked her head hiding behind her hair.

'I'm not sure.' she told them. 'Maybe.'

'It was.' Everyone turned to Her who had not spoken since He had taken up telling the tale.

'Himalia can do things. she has power over words.' he squeezed her hand.
'At first I thought she was a truth teller too- or just a seer.' all four elders nodded.
'But when she lied, such as in the tower she spoke it and it became the truth.'

He ducked her head away from everyone, not liking the way they studied her as one would study a fascinating piece of art. 'What are you trying to say?'
Anyway, lean forward toward them.

'That somehow her will out ceded the truth. She is a binder not a seer.'

Ham's mouth gaped. 'Binder?' Neel scooted forward. Dawn tilted her head. 'There has not been one of those in my lifetime. centuries.'

He shrugged. 'Sorry.' he said to her. He better- be.

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'I was not sure. Do not be upset.'

He ignored him. 'How are you so sure now?'

'You stopped that fire and it is better to come to terms with it now. You are a truth binder.'

'Can you show us?' Mara asks. Ham's chest squeezed.

'I haven't felt my magic since the fire.'

Sheldon nodded. 'You overexerted yourself' He was so confident and graceful He could not help but like him. 'It will come back.'

'Hope so.' She squeezed her hand.

'I do as well.' Mara agrees. 'It sounds as though you will be needing it.'

He wanted to tell them that they were the ones in more danger than she was. Neelan spoke before she could.

'I agree, just what is going on up there.' as one they all turned to Him.

No one in the room knew but they all had a feeling. 'We need to get back there.' She told them.

'You aren't going anywhere.' He interjected. 'Not with this, she tugged the chain around his neck. 'You aren't.' If her hunch were right, he would be arrested on sight, something was going on in the palace she could feel it.

'What are you suggesting?' Dawn asked.

'I don't know but I know who started all this.' He gripped her shirt. 'It is all speculation of course.' They all nodded. Of course, 'none of Heir's court is...brave enough, to do this. Few of them have the brain for it.

Her frown. 'I left Nevaeh as my ear; she should have reported to me.'

'How is she going to do that?'

'She has a talisman.' He frowns; he had never told her that. Did they speak at all?

'She hasn't contacted me at all.' They all shifted under his rising anger, except Him.

'Do you think she could be behind this?'

He did not say anything, Sheldon did. 'You think a woman did this?' He ignored the hostile glares of the four women. 'Oh, calm down.' he growled when Neelan poked him. He jumped when she growled back. 'All I meant was there no way a woman would be given enough influence to do this sort of thing.'

'Who says she was its front runner and face.' He mused to all. 'There are a lot of men that would do that and let someone else control the mind of everything. You know a man with all the looks and no mind.'

'Have you ever met a man with a mind?' Mara, a fallen angel on earth, teased the three in the room. He laughed. Angels never really change look at me with my 105 years.

'It is my misfortune to know several.' she blushed when unsway winked at her. 'I must agree it is irritating when they try to make sense of impossibilities.' Herr's lips quirked up. 'But do you see my point?'

Sheldon pursed his lips. 'We do.'

'That is why I think I should be the one to go back.' He volunteers before they produce anything else. He shot her a look, but the idea stayed in the air. 'I'll go back and report to you- as often as I can.'

'Him-'

'We need information.' He rounded him knowing that tone of voice. He was going to try and get fussy with her again. 'Did you know that they have people thinking the Gods are behind all of this. That they are displeased!' Everyone winced. 'I'm going.'

'Not without me.' He sat up straighter, He poked him back placing her hand on top of the necklace.

'No, you are not.' He had no magic, but he could shift. If they were placed upwards, it would put them in hellfire. It was not happening.

'Besides.' She went on. 'They would arrest you on sight.'

'For what?' He blinked. 'I was kidnapped!'

'Who do you think helped with that abduction?' he raised a brow. He cursed. She was not the only one who had thought that way. Her abductors had helped to get in and get her out of the palace. 'This is good-I think.' Neelan chimed in. Everyone turned to her. 'It is not very old- a few decades. There was an assassination- yes on the king and queen and his father. There was no heir but his brother.' He winced she knew where the woman was going, and it was not going to help. Neelan went on. 'Instead of the brother being named heir, the brother's wife was going to be crowned Queen-'

'Because she was beloved by the people, and they thought the brother was cold and heartless. He loved women and to gamble with the treasury.' He interjected pressing into Herr's back to stop his trembling. 'We know the story.'

Neelan beamed; didn't she see how upset this was making Her? 'You know this story?'

He answered but was cut off by Her- 'Yes.'

'The story is of my mother', She interjected. He squirmed in his lap. His body was trembling. Only family and close friends knew the true story of Queen Chiara.

'The Ask Queen?' Sheldon frowned. 'It can't be the same girl- her hair was-'

'Black.' He nodded. 'Anything is possible when the Gods are involved.'

He shuddered. 'My mother's life was not always a happy one. Her uncle married her off to a foreign prince, the older Mystery prince. He was so sure that she would be Queen that he did not care about the rumors that surrounded the man he was marrying her to. He was cold, and the wife he had before died under mysterious circumstances.' He wrapped his arms around her, He relaxed sinking back wishing she could do more to comfort him. This was the story, the only story, He had ever seen Rakish get upset over.

'Instead, the King crowned his younger son heir', Him squirmed under the pressure of Heir's hands.

'Both King and heir soon met their ends one by poison and the other by arrow.'

Every person in the room sat in silence under Herr's words. Even Alec prompts his head-on Uway's knee to listen. He slipped under Herr's mental barriers. 'I can take it from here.' she knew this story as well as She did.

He ignored her. 'The oldest son, Tyrel, was furious that his wife had been given what he considered his birthright, but he could not do anything about it. She was pregnant and if anything happened to her there would be a cry of civil war for the throne. For action.'

The room sways. 'She was a good leader, the people loved her, but her husband could not take it. He beat her, she hit her head, and everyone thought she was dead. They sent her out down the Your river, it leads straight Rockville Pennsylvania, right thought one of the portholes from this demotion of a world to yours.'

'She stops.'

Ham's hand shook his shoulder. He hated talking about this, he hated this story because he hated the man who did that to his mother. He hated that his mother confided in him that she still has flashbacks.

He looked down at her, she pleaded silently for him to stop. He sagged and finally did.

'She did a lot of good.' Mara agrees. 'She passed a law; it is buried under years of neglect, but it is there. A woman can rule in her husband's absence.'

He nodded. She had read about that but there was something else, something was missing from that law. She bit her lip. It could just be something trivial. 'Then I can use that.' 'Let us not be rash, the rash get killed.' Sheldon raised a hand from his pillow. 'You are too smart.' He snorted.

'Sheldon must not remember the bit about you impromptu with the Natali king?'

'Probably not.' He grinned. 'And that wasn't rash.'

'Besides.' She cut in. 'We aren't sending you there alone at all.' He was a friend of her mind and a traitor to the public.

'Who says I'll be alone.' he asks. 'Alec will be with me.' To show him, Alec yarned, baring all his teeth before flopping down in Uway's lap again.

'He wants you to scratch him.' He told Unsway helpfully.

'Ferocious indeed.' He nodded. 'It isn't enough.'

'We have time to think about it.' Neelan stood. 'Let us all think about it.'

He wanted to scream; they did not have time. There was no time left once the fire burned Median. They were out of time, they needed to act.

A hand took hers. 'Sleep on it.' Mara patted her hand. Sheldon and Dawn nodded. They would think it was best.

'Well good night.' Dawn did a graceful courtesy. He was stumped. I could not be nightfall already. No! She had hoped to be able to sneak away to the temples for a little while and relieve Rue a little.

The Elders were first, she Her, Unsway and Alec brought up the rear. The four Elders were in deep conversation ahead of them. The three of them barely spoke until Unsway veered away. 'Night all.' He waved back at him, and he disappeared.

She detoured them off into the right hall and she could no longer hear the mumbling of anything. 'Where are we going?'

'To our room.'

'He is right, we sleep down here.' Alec padded ahead. 'Mate is sleepy.'
She was the only one in the group who was directionally challenged.

What did Alec mean calling Her 'mate.'? So, he was not the only one to see it. She looked tired. 'Have you slept at all?'

He squeezed her. 'Don't get accusing me.'

'He wouldn't leave your bed.' Alec told her. It thrilled her that he had stayed by her, why did Alec sound so grumpy about it?

'He wouldn't let me sleep on the bed.'

'Why are you smiling?' She asked her finally to come to their door. He opens it.

'Alec isn't happy with you.'

'You are happy that I pissed off the cat?' He raised a brow leading her in.
'What did I do?'

'You wouldn't let him sleep on the bed.' He pouted.

'No use in letting him start now, he will only break it when he gets older. See he is fine right there.' Alec had curled up right near the fire, seeming perfectly content with himself.

Someone had built a fire and left. Besides them, no one else was in the room. 'Will you stay?' His grip on her hand slackens enough to let her pull away.

'Do you want me to?' Her throat tightens and sweat breaks on her palms. She had not slept in the same room, knowingly, with Her since they were Bound.

It was too late to take the words back, they were out. She waited for him to leave or stay. She did not know what more she wanted.

'Stay.' his grip tightens again around her hand.

She had not expected him to say yes. The room suddenly felt too crowded, his hands too warm even with the block of ice swirling around her belly as he led her to the bed.

He watched him kick off his sandals and scurried to do the same as well as take the darts from her hair. Her braid slapped her back as she scrambled up into the bed scooting over to make room for her husband. What now? What did she do now?

She watched with fascination; it was a simple move. All he did was take off his vest and slide into bed, but it was the most graceful thing she had ever seen. He watched him roll to get comfortable, he slept on his side.

'Come over here.' He tried not to bristle or shiver at his words. It was easier to do the former when he said 'Please.' She scooted forward letting him roll back the covers and tuck her in. He had to feel her heart thump into his chest. She had never been so close to him like this before.

'What are you doing?' she asked bewildered when his head nuzzled into her neck. His breath tickled. She had not known what to expect but this was not it.

'Going to sleep.' he said, burying his head in her hair. He hoped she had not missed a dart. She squirmed to get comfortable, he did not let her move much else. She could not get away. He listens as his breath becomes shallow and even.

'Her?'

'Mom?'

'Why did you sleep before?' What had changed?

'You weren't safe before,' his words grumbled out. 'Nothing will happen to you here.'

Because this place was sacred? or because he knew and trusted the people here?

'Her?' He murmured. 'Her?' He was asleep. Truly sleep.

He snickered, feeling his snoring hit her jaw. She was not going to wake him even to tease him about his horrible snoring. It could wait. Over on the rug, Alec had rolled over onto his back in front of the fire. His mouth was slightly open, his pink tongue hanging over the side of his mouth. The last thing he looked at was terrifying. His tail slithers side to side every occasionally, darting into the fire and quickly away.

Between wondering if she would have a burnt kitty kit and Herr's snores, He fell asleep. Looks as though Cousin Grean has had a bit too much to drink, Westcliffe said, signaling for two footmen. get him to his carriage.

Ansley looked over to see Sheffield grinning like a loon. Finally, I will have a nonboring tale to tell, he said triumphantly. I would keep it to yourself, Sheffield, Ansley warned.

Of course, old boy. But he was fairly bouncing on the balls of his feet as he shouldered his way through the men who had gathered around at the commotion. Apologies, he said to the men. I could not let an insult to Welford go unchallenged. Drink up.

Westcliffe took Ansley's knowing that she was one of the fallen- and would reveal wings and fangs when the trust was made, and the dissented of dark-

magic- and craft, the arm and led him to a distant corner of the room, Stephen following in their wake.

‘Sh-h.’

What was that all about? Westcliffe asked once they were away from prying ears. He questioned the legitimacy of Jannie's child. You must know everyone is questioning it. it does not matter. She was with child when Welford died. The courts will recognize it as his.

His words were spoken with too much vehemence. Both of his brothers were studying him as though only seeing him for the first time and as life. it is none of my concern' Westcliffe began. No, it is not, Ansley assured him.

‘His not going to become like us?’

He strode for the Palace doors trying to hold her head high, it was hard. Her world felt as though it had been flipped upside down, she did not want to tell Nevaeh or Meridian who walked beside her. They would think or know that the Golem's poison was finally starting to affect her and take her back to the Dancer's Guild. She could not tell them, so He fixed her eyes on the walk ahead. It was not hard for Nevaeh by her side to keep her steady.

'Almost there.' Nevaeh murmured to her softly. He nodded, her body was not tired, but a dull ache began to beat in her temples and her vision sometimes blurred out of focus if she moved her head a certain way. The quicker she got

Genny and Away out the better. The quicker she got everyone she cared about to safety, the better.

'Where is everyone?' He asked as she realized that Meridian, Nevaeh, and her own were the only footsteps to be heard wandering the Palace Halls. The only sounds besides that were the swishing of her Dancer's skirts that Nevaeh had fetched her. It sent chills to her spine. It reminded her of her first day coming back to the Palace after the Fire.

'Don't know.' The meridian said uneasily. 'It almost reminds me of the time when the King went missing, the whole city was placed on curfew for days.' At the same moment, Nevaeh hissed for them to hurry. They did, all of them spent for the Prison's Keep. A side staircase took them under the palace. His head ached too much to take in her surroundings. She just knew that one moment there had been sunlight pouring in through massive windows, the next their world was under the earth with only torches and mage-light to see. Rows of cells lined the left and right side of the hallway; He did not investigate any of them. Not until she heard. 'He!' It was Genny's voice. His head snapped up in its direction.

Genny's face peeped out from between the iron bars. Her face was covered with soot and dirt, a grim smile lighting her face. 'You're all right.' relief flooded He's chest when she heard Genny's voice. Unable to do more, He nodded. She was unable to bring herself to tell her that she did not have much time left.

'You shouldn't have come here, they-' He cut in before she could start to chastise her.

'Where is Away?' She demanded in a deep voice, Genny's voice stilled, her feature turning into stone. It was not hard as stone, He bet if she pushed hard enough Genny would crack to a million pieces. Conflict warred behind her dark eyes that were almost black in the sunless space. Finally, she came to a decision.

'They are trying him today.' He paled too, beside them Nevaeh and Meridian tense. His mouth went dry, and she had to close it. There was nothing she could say. 'What!' She found her voice; it was too loud. 'What could they-'

Again, there was conflict before Genny sighed. It was a small gesture that made her tragically beautiful, and then she was shaking her head. 'They think that you and he have been having an affair.' He closed her eyes to stop the space from going from black to red. They were crazy, absolutely insane. 'He?' Genny said in a tight voice. 'Everyone knows that-'

'Get her out.' He shoved her lock picks at Nevaeh knowing she knew how to use them. She did not want to hear whatever Genny had been about to say. 'Take her straight to the Guild. I will meet you there.' Nevaeh stopped her eyes narrowing on her.

'No.' Nevaeh, Genny, and Meridian glared down at her. He drew herself up to full height preparing for a battle. Goddess, they did not have time for this! She was running out of time; didn't they get it?

'I'm not giving you a choice and you don't have to come.' He tried to make her voice icy as she glared at them all. 'Go.' He ran for the exit surprised to find Meridian at her heels a moment later. Together they ran for the Council Chamber like their lives depended on it. Away's might.

Their feet were suddenly too loud and slow as they clacked on the stone floors. He burst through the ridiculously huge Council Chamber doors flanked by Meridian. As one eye turned to them, every gaze held the same expression. Shock. He glared back accusingly at the sight of her.

'What is the meaning of this!' her voice rolled through the room like quiet thunder. No one quaked in their seats, but no one moved either. Meridian put a restraining hand on His shoulder, but she violently shook him off. Anger rolled through her like magic, she wished it were magic. She would tear the walls down around them with her anger alone.

His feet carried her down the aisle towards the lone stand. Away stood behind it, his eyes bright at the sight of her but grim at the same time. At least he looked all right, dirty but not harmed. He thought.

'Lady.' The sneering voice caught her attention; she looked up to the dais and blanched. The highest Biseal sat in the King's Chair. He sat in She's seat!

'Biseal.' He said with as much contempt as she could sew into that one word. Goddess, she did not like this man. 'You are in my husband's seat.' She said even when her hand grabbed Away's arm. Her fury only grew when she realized that they had chained him, and his arms were bruised and his hands bloody.

'Someone had to take lead while you were,' he coughed 'absent.' The Meridian said that the guards had chased them when they tried to remove her from the Palace. Had the Guards been trying to stop them from hurting her, or had they been about to finish off what the Golem had started? No one seemed in any hurry to arrest Meridian and he stood right next to her. They glared at him.

'I wasn't in the best of health.' He said through gritted teeth.

'How are you feeling now?' he asked, leaning forward-looking too interested. He knew without any doubt that he was the one to send that Golem. If Meridian had been telling the truth, then he was the one that had if not started the Fire, then conspired it. Maybe even tricked the apprentices into accidentally doing the spell.

'I would be better if you didn't have my Guard in chains.' She hissed at him. 'Come down from The King's Chair.'

'I was voted in for this seat.'

'It was in my absence!' He hissed back.

'My Dear, a lot has changed in your absence.' He sneered. Funny how one seat could make him think he had so much power? He shook off the fact that it had made her think the same. How stupid she had been to think she was practically untouchable.

'Would you care to fill me in then?' he asked neutrally. The Meridian had made his way to her side. Biseal spared him a disgusted look before turning back to her. The Lords, all of them seemed to shift restlessly, they had come to some decision about her, and she was to be told. Now.

'The Gods sent me a vision about you my Dear of what you really are.' he said imperiously. His stomach ached; he was lying. He had to be, there was no way a magician had visions. That was done in the temples, another reason that the two were opposite. Mages believed in magic; Priest believed in fate. He was lying his fat ass off.

'Oh, really?' He said casually, in her mind she reached for Her, her hand wrapping around her necklace. She wanted him to hear this. 'What did they tell you?'

'That you are unfit to rule as a woman. That child in your belly is a lie fabricated to keep you here. You have played your part here well Lady,' there went that sneering again. 'But I have been told you did not share your husband's bed

before you were taken to Natali. You were, however, alone often with- him.' he nodded towards Away. His jaw dropped open. She did not know whether to laugh or screech at his lies.

'Those are lies!' The meridian spoke when she found she could not. All He could truthfully see was red. The room swayed dangerously and for a moment she was not sure if it was the poison taking hold of her finally or if it was her rage. Maybe if she screamed and lunged at him the poison would pour from her mouth and fingertips into his worthless lying form while she strangled him! Her fingers twitched to try.

'This is treason!' He shook her head, unable to stand, not being able to simply slit his throat. 'Away is a friend, a trustworthy friend that has guarded me and my reputation better than anyone in this room can boast!'

'I'm sure he guarded you,' Biseal coughed. 'Very well. Adultery of The Lady is an act of treason as well.' Biseal said just as easily. She could not believe it. The room sat in anticipatory silence. No one was aiding Biseal in case He got the upper hand. No one wanted to lose their throat for treason. They were not going to help her either. Somehow Biseal had gotten to every member of the Court. She was on her own. Goddess, she wished Alec were with her.

'You've already tried to kill my child.' He found her tongue. 'I was not here because I was attacked right outside of the Goddess's temple in the palace.'

That was black magic! Is that the will of the Goddess as well?' He sneered wondering what he was to say. 'Or is it just your will in the God's name.'

He was so sure he had him. He did not even blink. 'A Foreigner harps of foreign tales of Black magic and Lies.' His mouth dropped. At that moment she saw all the hate that he had held back. Hate mixed with something else that made her skin shiver. Lust?

'I am not.'

'Then why are you not dead?' he asked, sitting back waiting for her to amuse him. There was a murmuring agreement from the Lords. He turned to glare at them. All but a few glared boldly back.

'Because I am a mage.' He told them, holding her head high. It was not a lie; she had a theory that it was the only reason her mind had not completely turned into meaninglessness.

Part:

'He doesn't-' Away began but He silenced him with a wave of her hand.

'Mage?' Biseal said skeptically, his beady eyes looking over her. 'I think not.'

'I know so.' He stood proud. 'I'm a Truthteller.' The room erupted into laughter. Even Biseal chuckled in his snorting laughter. He glared at him. 'It is true,'

'Show me?' Biseal asked-

'He, don't.' Away began. He shut him up with a glare. She was doing this for him, to get him out; he did not need to know that she was already doomed. He was not telling her not to say anything for fear of them knowing she was a mage but because he knew what she was going to say.

she took a deep breath and told him. 'I haven't felt my magic since I put out The Fire.' A rumble of comments rippled around her. Even Meridian shot her a funny look, a skeptical one but still shocked. 'I- I don't know when it will return.' She held up her hands in a helpless shrug that left Biseal purple. His head was purple; it reminded her of a pimple that needed to be popped. He took a step forward and was snatched back. Meridians wrapped his arm around her shoulders pulling her close to his side jostling her. He blinked, Biseal's face was normal again. It was red, not purple and it did not look like a pimple but damn if she would not like to squish it anyway. Especially when he said.

'You are a dirty little liar that was never for the good of Ysterym. You are the reason the Gods have forsaken us. You are the reason our King has fled. It is... You; it has always been you!' His mouth feels open. 'You are the Black Omen upon Ysterym. Nothing will be put right until we do it.' Behind her, there was a murmur of agreement.

'But- I,' words failed her as her knees turned weak. For once she was speechless. Instead, her hands slipped into Meridian's pocket pulling out the picks

she had begged him to find. The room fell into an eerie silence. Away just looked at her in shock. Everyone else looked nervous.

'Are you completely off your head?' She heard Meridian say with a quiver in his voice. 'She is the Queen, no matter what you think she has done. It does not make it true! There were bad omens in Ysterym long before she came and will be here long after we go to our graves. You are a fool!' He wanted to cheer. Instead, she hedged away from Meridian. He knew what he was doing and silently thanked him. This meeting had shot to hell quickly, they needed out. He slowly inched towards Away who stood in horror and rage as he looked at Biseal. Like he wanted the man's throat. Gods, He had never wanted anything so bad.

His hands firmly gripped Away's wrist, after she did this they had to be prepared to run. She looked at Away. He nodded; his face determined. She had to remember to tell him that Nevaeh had gotten Genny out before he went off to look for her. The picks turned in the lock with an audible click. He winced even as the shackles fell into her hands from Away's wrist.

'Seize her!' He flew backward behind the protective stances of the two men. The Meridian tucked her safe against his back as he whirled around to hear the sound of sliding swords. Despite herself, He was intrigued by them. They were different than any sword she had ever seen. The blade instead of being straight and pointed, the were sickled with a blade's edge for a tip. 'Take her in, all of them in for the use of Black magic against Ysterym and treason against the king's name!'

'No!' He gripped Meridian's arm. She looked at Away, he did not have chains shackling him, but he was in no condition for a fight. The meridian was too exhausting to fight. He did not want to fight them. She simply wanted Biseal's head to roll.

'There isn't another way out.' The Meridian hissed. His belly rolled. She knew there wasn't.

'Do you have a weapon.' when he did nothing but look at her, He cursed before belatedly realizing she did not have a dagger on her either.

'Grab Her, get her!' The first guard charged them. He easily dodged his stupid attempt at them.

Meridian grabbed his swords as He kicked him down to the ground. Her foot rolled him over to his side. Just in time to trip the next guards charging them. Somehow Meridian fought off two, three, until away was able to pick up the sword and help. He was tucked in close beside Meridian. Away stuck near her open side. He could not believe that their duo was fending off a troop.

It was obvious that Meridian was a sword's man he held his weapon like it was a part of his arm. Away was an assassin and held his own. Both kept their bodies in front of He as though they were her breathing armor. She watched in awe as Away stabbed a nearby guard that had tried to do the same. Rushing forward He raided him for weapon's praying silently to the Goddess to forgive them all, and

herself. She came out with a short dagger and a sword that she was only moderately trained to use.

'Thank you.' Away easily nicked the sword out of her hand as he twirled into another fight. They were still progressively moving forward towards the huge Council doors.

Part:

'Hey-' He wished she had thought not to distract them. A trio rushed her friends at once, each taking them in a different direction. One left, the other right, and one came at the front and center. Meridian sliced through the first one while away hacked back the second. The third rushed past them right for He, his blade aimed for her chest.

'He!' Away tried to trip the guard but was forced to engage another guard who had rushed forth. His eyes widened as her body reacted, twisting into itself. He twirled out the way slamming into Away's side as her hand that held the dagger lashed out. She felt it connected with something hard yet soft and sink in. She squealed as the guard went down; a fresh spurt of blood flowed from a side wound. By the Goddess, they were painting the Council Room red. No one moved to interfere, to help, they were completely alone. He rubbed her head, a serious pain tingled along her spine and up into her head.

'Princess!' He jumped, looking up at the dais where the King sat. She could have wept.

'She?' He nearly dropped her knife in a burst of joy at seeing him there. He would set everyone to right. By the look on his face, no one here today would pay for what they were doing.

'He waits!' He ignored Away's arms; he did not understand that they were saved. She would help them straighten this whole thing out.

He picked up her Dancer's skirts as she ran for the dais dogging around the fallen bodies of the guards. She had to make it back to the dais where She was. He stood tall looking down at her, a grim smile spread on his face that made her want to hug him even more. She just needed to get to him.

'She!' He reached out for him as she ascended the steps. He reached for her snatching her forward with a force that made He gasp. The momentum slammed her forward into a solid chest, she could have cried out.

'Goddess, I've missed you.' He said on the verge of tears. She wanted to cry and scream. He wanted to kiss Her for coming home at last and not leaving her with this mess. She looked up into his scowling face as he looked out at the Lords.

'I know Princess, never again I swear.' He hugged her tightly. 'Give me the dagger.' He reached for it. He hesitated.

'I-'

'Heania.' Her voice became stern. 'Give me the dagger.' His hands took it from her fingers while she tried to decide whether she should hand it to him or not.

He sputtered up at him about to give him a piece of her mind, but she was twirled around to face the Lords. Why were Away and Meridian still fighting? Didn't they see that She was home, they could stop? Her mouth opened to yell for Away or Meridian before something sharp nicked into her neck. The world stopped, He froze, like a blade bit into her skin. It was her blade- why would She press a dagger to her throat?

'Don't say a word or I will slice you open.' The words made her shudder at their coldness, she meant it. He was going to kill her.

'The baby-' He began-

'That bastard can die with you.' He head-butted him; it must have stunned him because She roared as he stumbled back, the blade pressed dangerously into her neck. He gulped but must have cried out because Away and Meridian turned to her as one. Both stood stunned as she felt. What was going on?

'She?' He asked tentatively-

'No Darling,' The voice sounded like She. He shut her eyes against his words, he had told her no. He must have been telling the truth, she never called her

Darling. 'Drop your weapons.' He was not speaking to her; He guessed he spoke to Away and Meridian. She winced when both did so without hesitation.

'Don't you hurt her.' Meridian started through clenched teeth as if that would somehow remove the blade from her throat.

'I cannot hurt the dying.' She heard a soft murmur in her ear. It made her shudder. 'You are dying aren't you, Darling?' He wanted to shake her head but ended up just shaking, period. It earned her a cruel laugh. 'Seize them!'

'No!' His words broke through her haze. This was not happening, not again. Please Goddess let this be some horrible dream. He prayed with her eyes wide open as she lunged forward the blade sliced into her throat creating a shallow cut. He barely noticed the hot slice of pain. 'Let them go! Please!' Guards rushed the two men; she saw their weapons being kicked out of grabbing distance. Two guards stood on either side of Away and Meridian as they tied her friend's hands behind their backs. This could not be happening, but it was. She was letting this happen- he was doing it! He thought fast.

'You can't.' He started louder and more confidently than she could have ever thought possible.

Part:

'Away is under diplomatic immunity, if you touch him, you risk a war with Natili. We cannot afford a new ally to become an old foe. It is not Meridian's

fault, I threatened to take away his land and title if he did not help me. You have no reason to hold them here, banish them and be done with it.' She frowned but shrugged.

'If you keep fighting to get her not only, will I kill her outright, but you will also both hang.' Both men stopped their advancement. The room rustled finally; the Lords broke out into wild murmuring. He would outrightly kill the Queen. He heard bits or what they were saying. 'Still, she might be telling the truth, there might be a child.' She turned them out again to favor Meridian and Away who was eying her stubbornly. If they stayed any longer, they would do something rash that would get them killed. They had to go.

'Go my Lords; you're both dismissed from my service.' He said as Queen as she could. Her legs felt as though they would buckle, her whole body just wanted to explode from frustration and anger. This was unfair, it was not right, it- a flash of pure hit struck her body, and she felt her magic boil up out of pure frustration. He reached for it desperately only to feel it retreat. Frustrated tears pricked her eyes, she blinked them away quickly.

Neither of the men moved. He frowned. 'Guards!' she called while pleading with them both. 'See that Lord Away and Lord Meridian make it safely outside the palace walls.' She said watching more guards come forward to flank them. 'No harm will come to them.' He said as menacingly as possible.

'No harm will come to them.' The guard, the lead guard, decided when he took a stance before her. His eyes glittered with a look He did not understand, anger? Was he angry that he had to obey her? His lips were pinched tight as he gave a curt nod to his team. The Meridian and away were dragged from the room. He winced when they struggled.

(Hindmost to Nevaeh)

Brainwashing is running rampant right now. When intelligence is based off- on a Halo of sociology this is what you would get, by the perception of using your power of mind remembering to think for yourselves the truth is seen.

All human life and existence matters, everybody has the 14 amendments to not be discriminated against a biased or prejudiced in any kind of segregation like pigment for skin for any tune equality to any kind of race or existence of that of humankind.

Likewise, it is time to kindly stop the hate crimes move on with your lives and realize that we all have a constitutional right of equality in fair in this country of the United States of America, stop being feeble-minded.

At the age of 5 in 1999, this prognosis was made of the above with the same idea of being nothing more than theoretical- and only counties based in giving to the student, and somehow by twisted words of letting the word-of-mouth dictate

this has become a mentality slur to me, that I do not have, yet was wrongly given for countless years.

We need to understand the report that was said and retold to some was dated when I was 5 years old saying I was at the understandings of the higher mind of 7 years of age.

No. I am open in saying that I have never relinquished my rights to have this acquired whatever, it was given agents my free-will... and at no point, an endangerment to have what was listed, yet claim to this was nothing more than a falsehood of defamations.

I wanted my wrath on the world. I find it utterly disgraceful, disheartening, deplorable, and more than rechargeable the state in which our country is right now gives me much sorrow and disappointment, and despair applicable to that of a dismayed, dismal, dreaded, of reality.

WE have the right to free speech as our 1st amendment- not the right to be a TARD by being dimwitted.

Everyone, that I have gone to school with was and still is aphasic, let us not just say one of them rolls their crap into balls and eats crayons more than others here, you can call that temperament if you wish, yet it is all just categories, to perceive and overlook or exaggerate.

Alexia has an acquired reading disability because of an acquired event such as a stroke. It is most common for alexia to be accompanied by expressive aphasia (the ability to speak in sentences,) and agraphia (the ability to write.)

‘Why did my life SHIT THE BED?’ 'Simplemindedness' is apparent to those that are simplistic,' in mentality and diagnostics of intelligence quotient- that do not at any time bring forth higher thinking and learning.

(Back)

I remember the place that was not a dream, another world, a historical monument in my honor, the building that was a mile long and a half-mile in with, a world that I grasped in my mind was becoming true to others, that I was going to make mine.

A boat ride through reflecting shallow waters would take all of use to my world, child after child in boats all around me, to the passage to the underworld, amidst a lamp flickering, hanging from the front, all the faces were soft, distorted, and ominous. A rain carton of mist, and waterfalls around every column.

Then in this new world, I saw Away’s face was horrified, his eyes wild as they dragged him down the aisle and out. Meridian was not any better. The door closed with a heavy thud; she swallowed hard as the blade pressed close to her skin.

'If your intent,' slightly murmured tightly up at him. He still heads the knife, her hair, he still holds the power. 'Is to kill me, you should press the blade down further.' She told him to wait for him to do what she instructed while hoping he would not have the guts.

'Worthless foreign-' the blade pressed down so swiftly He said her last prayer prepared for what was coming.

'Think of the child!' a voice cried from the pews of Lords. 'You cannot murder a woman with child!' He investigated the crowd to see a young lord, one of the young lords she had scolded long ago in her first sit-in after her Coronation.

'There is no child- it is a figment of this liar's darkest imagination. She is mad!' She cried out, the blade pressing closer to the vein pounding. She barely dared to breathe. How this could be happening to her.

'Lords, I swear to you it is not.' He spoke as quickly and loudly as she dared out to the Lords watching her closely. 'I am no liar.'

'Right.' She spoke. 'Because you're a truth teller.' His tone was mocking. He closed her eyes praying that this was over quickly. He knew that she was a truth-teller. He had exposed her to what she was the moment they were Bound.

'She is rash, and unruly.' Came an ancient voice. It made Him open her eyes again; she had never heard it speak before. 'If we have learned nothing as

Lords, we have learned that a woman deserves mercy- fairness. We do not know if she is lying. She must stand trial before we decide what the best course of action is.'

A ripple of agreement arose from the council. It gave Him hope; she hoped that there was a chance. 'We can contact a healer of our own, if she is lying then she will easily be found out.' There were more murmurs, some good some bad. He held her breath as much for the blade pressing into her throat as waiting for the Lords to decide her outcome.

'For the sake of the Goddess, Biseal let the woman breathe.' An ancient Lord said tiredly. His vision saw, Biseal? Had he just said Biseal? His brows furrowed, the man holding her was She did not they see that?

A sharp movement brought her forward and back into something solid and hard that left the back of her skull aching. He hissed, her head turning to glare up at Her. She paled instantly. The color drained from her face down her body before it dissolved into the floor. She was not the one gripping her, it was Biseal. The poison had messed with her mind yet again. Making her see what was not there, Goddess she had thought that Biseal had been She and she had played right into his arms. He shook her head trying to make sure this was not a dream. Desperately she wanted someone to wake her up.

He stood behind her looking triumphantly smug with the blade still poised in his hand to strike. A mad glint in his eye flashed saying that he almost did

not care one way or the other if this group of men saw him strike her down. He might be glad for witnesses of her death.

'We should Cage her until we can find a judge for her trial.' He wanted to rail at them that there would be no trial. At the ancient Lord whom the others seemed content to let speak for them. Even Lord Kane did not utter protest though his eyes flashed when he looked her way.

'Trial, trial for what?' Biseal shook his head, unable to believe that someone was speaking against him.

'For her life.' The Ancient One snapped at Biseal as if he were stupid. 'I will not put an innocent woman to death, not one with a child. Not one who has done nothing deserving of an executioner.' He wanted to nod but did not dare.

'And if she is telling the truth?' Biseal snorted as though it were unlikely. 'Surely you don't want this unstable woman holding the Crown.'

'She can be tucked away in the summer palace, comfortably until her husband's return.' The Ancient One seemed doubtful at the thought of She is return. His wrinkled and worn brown face creased with worry and acceptance. He shook his head. 'Oh, of course there was a will put in place if something like this ever did happen. The King had it tucked away for safe keeping.' He felt Biseal tense.

'A will? Where?'

'Only a select group of Council Members and the Temples know where it lies. There was no reason to bring it out because she-' he indicated He. 'Was so adamant of The Kings impending return but we cannot hold it off any longer I suppose. A successor must be named.' His stomach dropped. What?

There were more murmurs of agreement. More nodding heads, His stomach swirled.

'If she is found guilty.' Biseal asked before the agreements were finished. He glared at him; something in his voice told her that he would be sure to do everything he could to make sure she was.

'Then the judge will rule whatever punishment he sees fit.' The Ancient Lord said serenely. 'It is fair.'

'Will she rule again?' Biseal asked.

'Without her husband, no.' he looked at Him and she wanted to believe she saw sadness there. Not pity but just concern for her. 'She should focus on her child ... if there is one.'

'There is.' He said before Biseal could tell them differently. Suddenly I blew out a tired breath. She wanted to tell them everything. From the beginning. She wanted-

'Take her to the Cages.' There was no time. 'Maximum Security, at least two, not three, guards stationed around her at a time.' Biseal commanded.

Guards sprang forward; their grips were gentle compared to Biseal's iron hold. He sagged against one of the Guards; it must have startled him because he caught her.

'Lady-' He shook her head before he could get himself into trouble. To this room, she was no longer the Lady. She was just a foreigner, a disgraced woman, a traitor. He cringed at the last one as another guard walked on her other side. She felt better having them around her, shielding her from Biseal's glare. She was getting away from him. Not for long, she knew, but she was still breathing.

'Take her there!' Biseal commanded. 'We will have a judge by tomorrow and get this straightened out.' He stumbled. She would be dead by tonight. How was she even lucid now when Aisling was confident, she would not be able to remember his name. Could this all be a dream?

He pinched herself and gasped. It defiantly was not a dream. This was truly happening. The Guards took her arms gently and led her from the Council Chamber but not before she heard the Ancient Lord and Biseal arguing. 'If she isn't hiding anything then she will have nothing to fear.' Beal's glare could be felt on the back of her head.

He shut her eyes if she had no intention of hanging, she would have to admit to treason.

OH MY GOD, PEOPLE! I am sitting in class at this very moment posting this for you guys who I love. He was stabbing my brain for me to post another chapter, so I had little choice.

~*~

He did not twitch, just watched her through those long eyelashes. A sleepy look could be an outright bored look on his sharp angular face. He could be assessing her as an enemy. He was an enemy until she found the underlying cause of all of this. That little speech he was trying to pull off put him high at the top. What was he hiding?

'It's been far too long Lady.' The meridian held out his hand to her. He shook her head. She might be trying to set up who was in charge, but she hated formality.

'I told you it's He.' She took his arm, letting him lead her out of the council chamber into the too quiet halls. The few they met gawked openly, giving the three of them as wide a distance as possible.

'Must be the crown.' The meridian patted her hand assumingly.

'It could be that.' She inclines her head. Or it could be the near hundred-pound Mystery Ice Cat following at her heels.

When one man collided with a wall, He had had enough.

'Are you all, right?' She took him by the shoulder examining him herself.

'Stunned deer.' Alec purred at her back. 'Frightened.' he could not be, who would he be frightened of?

Up close He saw that it was a youth, he could not be any older than fifteen summers and looked strikingly familiar.

He jerked as stunned by colliding with the wall as her touch. 'Yes-' his eyes caught the crown, he blinked and blinked again. 'Lady?'

'Lady Hernia.' The Meridian corrected at her back. Alec growled low enough for her ears alone. He did not like Meridian or just thought he was being a smart aleck.

'No, right, I meant- I've never met you before.' He marveled at her a moment longer. 'A pleasure.'

'Pleasure as well.' He let him take her hand and squeeze it before pulling away. He would have a bruised head and nothing more. 'What is your name?'

'Kaleen, son of Lord Kane.' ah, that explained the resemblance.

She did not know Kane was married nor had a son. 'Kaleen.' she nodded, backing away from him to Meridian who waited. By his robes, he was a Mage apprentice, what was he doing wandering the halls here and not at the university?

'On to your classes now.' The meridian sounded almost boring and short. He waved at the boy as one would a servant.

Kaleen bows to them both. 'I'm sorry about what happened to your husband.' His throat closed instantly. Before she could ask what, he meant Meridian barked.

'To class, now!' Kaleen scampered away and was gone around the corner before He could speak again.

'What did he mean?' He croaked rounding on Meridian. He had done that on purpose. 'Tell me.' She had to stop herself from growling. Alec did it for her, stalking for Meridian if she had not grabbed his collar, he would have Meridian's ass against a wall.

'Not here.' He admired his ability to keep his composure. She would not be that cool after having a hundred-pound cat with sharp fangs and claws very well. She was sure there would be hysterics. 'Please, He trusts me.' He grabbed her hand once more setting off. Finally pulling her into a room she had never seen. It was a study.

'This is part of my private rooms.' He pulled her inside, shutting the door. The meridian guided her to a chair expecting her to sit. Alec planted his big but squarely in front of her and looked up at Meridian. Just looked until the man took a step back and another. Putting half of a rug between them.

He bit back a snort as she felt Alec's smugness radiating through their bond.

'Hungry?' starving, He shook her head. What was it with everyone trying to feed her?

'No, Meridian.' He watched him sit across from her and do the same. It made her feel more comfortable. Now she was to do the fun part. Pick at his mind. 'Tell me the truth, you know something you aren't telling me.'

'No one knows what has happened to your husband.' The meridian shook his head. The light shining on his face made him handsome. He leans in hoping he would do the same.

He did. 'But you do.' She was confident. She saw all she needed to know run across his face. He did know something. Under all the sincerity, grief-stricken, burden heavy enough to make you choke demeanor he was hiding a secret.

'All I know are the rumors, Lady, nothing more.' He shook her head. She knew all about the rumors.

'What about the people that were trampled today. A priestess was stoned today along with the Dancer she was trying to protect. She watched carefully.

The meridian did nothing but blink. 'I wasn't away from anything going on like that.'

She did not believe him. She doubted there was much he did not know that went on around here.

'There is a rumor going around that your husband abandons his title, he left because you are leaving drove him mad. The Gods are enraged and will turn their backs on us for the disrespect of our king.' that did not sound good. 'I'm guessing, those people who caste the stones believe it.' It was not good.

He clamped her hands together and closed her eyes. 'I don't know what I am going to do.' She sniffles as she had done many times when she was young. Dealing with the men in her life she found tears got reactions out of them the fastest. 'I am Queen, and my husband isn't here for me.' She opens her eyes to see Meridian watching her intently. The way a hawk watched a bunny. It gave her chills. 'I'm not sure how everything works, you see I am still new to this...'

She turned her lips up with a rueful smile. She was sorry for being uneducated in the Vestryman way. 'I'm sorry.' she sniffles. 'I didn't mean to cry.' Shaking her head, she was scared that it had not worked. Meridian was a cold snake that would not fall for anything, not even the frustrated tears of a woman. Inwardly

screaming, He stood to leave. 'I better leave.' She headed for the door, Alec standing against her side keeping himself between Meridian and her.

'Lady, wait.' The meridian stood coming for her. He took her hand, He had to force herself not to shudder and blink bewilderedly at his charming smile. 'You stunned me, your tears.' He waited. 'You need someone here that is solely here to protect you. Look after you.' That was why Alec was here. 'To be your ears and to rely on.'

He did not have to force the watery chuckle. 'And who would that be. I do not know anyone here that well. Except Her and I am unsure of where he is.' she let another tear slide down her cheek.

'Rely on me malady.' He squeezed her fingers.

'Can I do that?'

It was supposed to reassure her, He was positive the smile that bloomed was supposed to make her knees weak and mind all gooey spilling out her ears at his feet.

'Always, Lady. I am sworn to the crown.' but not to Her.

'That is good. As soon as I have plans, I will give you instructions.' He nodded; it was impossible to tell what he was thinking behind those dark eyes. 'Oh, do you know where Nevaeh is?'

He stiffens. He raised a brow in question that was not the reaction she usually got when she asked about her house cleaner. She had struck a nerve.

'I'm sorry, Lady Nevaeh is not to be trusted.' He looked sad. 'She is a spy; I have little evidence to confirm it now, but I will in a couple of more scouting.

'What?'

'I don't feel it is in your best... interest to trust her.' his nose crinkled in distaste.

'She is one of my Women.' He pursed her lips in a frown. She did not trust Nevaeh either, but she was not trusting Meridian worth stones. 'All of them are trustworthy unless proven otherwise.'

He nodded, slowly. It was all over his face he had expected her to heed his warning. He did not like her thinking on her own. Women were not supposed to do that. 'One more thing, I want a list of the palace finances.' his eyes narrowed but he said.

'Yes Lady.'

Her smile was bright. 'You're a dear.' She patted his hand and let it go. Alec got to his feet. She had thought he had fallen asleep, should have known better.

'Let me suggest one more thing.' It did not sound at all like a suggestion. 'Assign yourself a personal guard. Two if you can.' he persisted. 'It would make everyone who cares about you feel better, I know Her would feel better.'

He frowns disliking the idea instantly, Guards were supervisors, babysitters, spies. 'I already have one.' Alec turned to Meridian baring his fangs and growled low and fearsome. The meridian paled but did not move from his perch. He was impressed.

'Think about it at least, please?' he appealed back to her. 'I'm beyond words that you are safely back home where you belong, it would hurt more than I can say if something happened to you because you don't want guards prying into your personal time.'

She did not know whether he was deeply concerned or the best actor she had ever seen. She did not know what he had to gain, but it must be something. He was a courtier; they did not spend time flattery and slivery words with no benefit at the end of it.

'I'll think about it.' at best.

He tried not to run for the door, Meridian watched her every step until she closed the door and leaned against it. It still felt as though his gaze was burning into her back through the wood. Letting Alec lead the way they all but ran to her room and locked themselves in.

He pulled out the pin that Alec had found for her and walked the distance that connected her room to Her's.

Alec followed her in, his pink nose crinkled. 'someone's here.' he charged, plowing her into the ground. In her ear, the sound of whistling metal passing by and its thump behind her told her how close she had come to death. Alec knew it too.

His roar rang through the room vibrating off the walls. He did it again, moving further into the room and again. He covered her ears getting to her feet, if he kept it up, she would be explaining to the whole palace. Alec stopped in front of a tapestry hanging on the far wall. 'She is here.' Alec snarled low.

'She?' How could he tell?

'She is bleeding.' Alec's nose crinkled. 'Female shells... Heely why do females bleed?' He went from her angry protector to her curious kit in the bat of an eye.

'I don't know.' He lied, getting to her feet coming forward, pulling a dart from her hair careful not to touch the numbing cream on the unsheathed tip.

'Do I kill?' Alec appealed to her. 'Or pounce? Mate said it was fine if I kill.' His head tilted, thoughtful.

He silently promised to smack Mate on the back of his thick head for this. At least he had thought to ask her.

'Don't kill.' She told him; his head dipped. He leaped on the tapestry. Bringing down fabric and a cursing figure wrapped in them. He was right it was female.

'If you move, the poison I have aimed at your throat will silence you before you can twitch.' She would be dead in moments, quicker than it took to sneeze or scream. He kneels beside Alec pointing the dart at the unknown's chest. 'Lady?' He froze before pulling back the curtain.

'Nevaeh?'

The woman stares up at her with wide brown eyes. The same way He was doing her. 'What are you doing here?' she spoke first.

'What are you doing here, trying to kill me?' He recoiled away

'I wasn't trying to kill you.' Nevaeh said slowly. 'I was protecting, he hasn't been gone that long, not even a season and those ungrateful wretches are already trying to break in here.'

He grins. 'Say that again.' Ungrateful wretches. Nevaeh grinned back looking at the dart.

'Does that really poison?'

'Yep.' He sheathed it away in its holder helping Nevaeh to her feet. She looked the same, still breathtakingly pretty.

'I'm glad you are home, where is Her?' she looked over He is shoulder expecting to see him leaning in the door frame. He was not there, a small pout formed on the woman's lips.

He sighs, she must stick to the lie. There was too much riding on it just to put Nevaeh at ease she was one person. 'I do not know. No one seems to be able to tell me.'

'He went to save you!' Nevaeh exploded. 'How could you not! How did you get away?'

'I struck up a trade with the Natali king in exchange for a horse and my freedom.'

She did not believe her. 'That worked?' He shrugged.

'I had a council meeting to attend. Could not be late.' For some reason that confused Nevaeh even more as she took in, He is crown and clothes.

'What council meeting, there isn't supposed to be one today, it is forbidden to hold council on the third day.'

Well, they were doing the forbidden, she had just attended a meeting in the council chamber. 'I will ignore it this once because I needed to see them

regularly. Now I need you. Nevaeh.' The other woman dusted off her skirts shooting angry looks at Alec who shot his looks back. Alec snarled, his fur standing on edge. He pressed his flank into He is side but did not do anything else. 'Nevaeh.'

She had her attention now. Good.

'What has been happening. No one can seem to tell me simply.' if at all.

She never blinked when she spoke, he did not need her magic to feel the weight of Nevaeh's words. 'Treason.' He nodded, she felt that much in her bones.

Good Christ, is it yours? Westcliffe asked, his lips barely moving.

It is Jannie's.

He left his brothers staring after him. In the length of a single heartbeat, everything had changed.

"You are so fortunate to be with a child," Lady Inwood said. You should pray for a son. Then you will not be dependent upon Glean Demure's mercies.

Sitting in a corner of the parlor, surrounded by women, Jannie felt as though there was no air to breathe.

Ansley has certainly been a godsend, hasn't he? Lady Sheffield asked. He has handled so many of the arrangements.

Was it her imagination that she heard insinuations in their voices? Why could they not leave her in peace?

Will you return to Herndon Hall now? someone asked a voice she did not recognize.

no, no, you must still be in Rockville, Lady Inwood insisted. to be a widow and with a child?

You need us to see you through it.

From time to time since the funeral, a few of the women made a morning call, but it was always awkward, and they were all so incredibly boring. Except for Lady Inwood, who had no qualms whatsoever about spreading gossip. She had even offered to let Jannie join in the wagering surrounding Ansley. He had made it known early on that he intended to select a wife this season, and while he had yet to attend a ball, speculation was high that he had already made his choice. Jannie did not want to acknowledge how it unsettled her to know that he was searching for a wife.

She certainly had no desire to marry him, doubted she would ever marry again. She heard the clatter of horses' hooves and the whir of wheels on the cobblestone. A coach approached. As it drew near, she recognized the crest on the door. Ansley.

Her heart leaped, and she fought to calm it. But it increased its tempo as he stepped out, obviously on an outing, dressed in a swallow-tailed jacket. On one hand, he held his top hat and walking stick.

He disappeared, and she refrained from opening the window to lean out and strive to catch another glimpse of him. He had not visited since the night of the funeral, the night he held her while she wept. That night, to her immense embarrassment now, she lashed out at him. A thousand times she considered sending a note of apology for her outburst because she missed him. As much as she did not want to acknowledge it, she did. Often since leaving Blackmon she thought of him always with guilt. All her thoughts should have been on Welford, although she now knew most of his were not on her.

The knock on her bed-chamber door had her coming to her feet. yes.

Lily stepped inside. his Grace, the King of Ansley would like a word.

She felt so drab and dour, already in her nightdress. But for her this Season there would be no balls. Tell him I am not at home. No. She shook her head. That would stop him. Tell him I am already abed ...no. Drat him! send him up. yes, m' lady.

Jannie moved over to the sitting area, positioning herself so a sofa was between her, and the door would be between her and Ansley. She did not want to give the impression that she was extremely glad of his presence. It was

inappropriate. A girl in mourning was supposed to be sedated, not anxious for her caller to arrive.

When he strode in, she thought she had never seen a more handsome man. Based on his expression of horror, however, he had never seen a more disheveled girl. Your Grace, how good of you to call. for God's sake, Jannie we have been through do not be so damned formal.

It is late and this is my bedroom. Formality is needed. You are on your way to a ball. I was, but I changed my mind when I saw all the carriages lined up. I was not in the mood for a tedious night. He set his hat and stuck it on a chair near the door before prowling toward her.

You are near enough, she said when it became obvious the sofa would not serve as an obstacle for him.

Thankfully, he did stop, but his gaze wandered over her, and she felt it like a touch. "You are not eating," he said.

I am... just not very much. I suppose your mother told you that. She dropped by each afternoon for a few moments.

I do not need her to tell me what is obvious. I daresay, you are not sleeping either some ...I' She sank into the chair. I do not know what is wrong with me. you are grieving.

I do not know if that is it, Ansley. I feel nothing.

He studied her for a moment before saying, 'I have come to invite you to have dinner with me tomorrow evening at my residence.'

I am in mourning. It would be entirely inappropriate.

Jannie, you need a few hours away from all this. Wear your widow's weeds. I will bring my carriage 'round at half-past seven. I will carry you out if I must. Ansley' Jannie.

She wanted to shriek. She did not know if she had ever known a more obstinate man. Yet neither could she deny how lovely it would be to be with someone who did not treat her as though she might break up at any moment. THEN- Very well, she said petulantly. He must have been given the impression she was not giving in too easily. Good. He removed his jacket and laid it over the arm of the sofa.

She sat up straighter. What are you doing? going to ensure that you sleep well tonight.

(Ansley)

Jannie. Reaching into his waistcoat pocket, he removed a small vile. What is it? oils. I am going to rub your feet. It will help you relax. No. She tucked her feet beneath the chair.

You will start with my feet and then you will journey upward and ...it would be entirely inappropriate.

I promise I will not venture higher than your ankles.

She shook her head. My ankles are swollen. You do not need to see them. move to the sofa. Or better yet, the bed. Do you not listen to the thing I say? What are you afraid of, Jannie?

That I am swollen and miserable and that you will be repulsed by me.

I am so sorry, she blurted.

He furrowed his brow. for what, pray to tell? for lashing out at you ...the last time you were here.

I did not take your words to heart. I know how difficult all of this has been for you. unbearable sometimes.

So-o tonight, I will give you something pleasant to take into your dreams.

He held out his hand, enticing her with those long, strong fingers. Come along, Jannie. Move to the sofa.

Against her better judgment, she did as he bade. When she was settled in the corner, pillows at her back, he sat at the opposite end and lifted her bare feet to his lap. Mesmerized, she watched as he poured several drops of oil onto his palm

before setting the bottle aside. Then his palm kneaded her sole. on, dear God. nice?
He asked.

THEN wickedly wonderful. You have done this before.

I once knew a woman who knew a great deal about the sensuous arts.
and you did not keep her? She was not mine to keep. Close your eyes.

She did, as his fingers worked their magic over the balls of her feet. Tell
me a story, something from your youth. my youth. Well, I was a very clever child.

His odious voice drowned on as he told her about playing a game of
hiding with Claire. The deep timbre and his constant massaging of her feet lured
her away to a place of no troubles, no grief, no sorrow.

She awoke from a deep sleep with only a bit of sunlight dancing into the
room. She did not remember climbing into bed, nor could she remember the last
time she felt so rested. She was beneath the covers but aware of the weight on her
hip. Ansley's hand cupped over her. He lay on top of the covers, his waistcoat gone
but his shirt and trousers were still in place. He must have carried her to bed. How
tired she must have been not to stir when he moved her.

His long dark eyelashes rested on his cheeks. She did hope her child
would inherit those. In truth, there was nothing about him that she did not want to
see in the child. She had missed him so. She had not wanted to admit it, but the
truth mocked her now because it was so lovely to wake him up in her bed.

Slowly he opened his eyes. Good morning.

His voice was rough from sleep, stirring her in ways she should not be stirred, reminding her of other mornings.

So, lady Inwood told me that you had intended to find a wife this Season. ohm. Yes, I had considered it. I still might. He gave her a devilish smile.

So, the women are wagering, you know ...on whom it will be.

So are the gents, from what I hear. Even my brothers blasted them. Who do they think it will be?

So, they've both chosen different women. They are both wrong. One woman talks so quietly that I must always bend over to get near enough to hear what she is saying. Marriage to her would give me an aching back before too long.

Jannie laughed lightly. and the other?

So-o the opposite problem. When she begins to speak, I must pull back in order not to go deaf from her caterwauling. Makes me appear to have some sort of twitch. I had no idea that the wife hunt was so troublesome. It is quite a bother. You should marry me to spare me the horror of it.

He was teasing, surely. Still, she shook her head. I think I shall be like your mother. A girl of means who can do as she pleases. I would always allow you to do as you please.

On, Ansley, you do not half tempt me. She rolled into a sitting position and saw the time on the clock on the mantel. good God! It is half past ten! If someone sees your coach' I send my driver on.

She glanced back at him, and he gave her an innocent shrug. I never leave my couch outside a lady's residence. And if I had not admitted you?

I would have walked, caught a handsome. I am resourceful. He pushed himself up, leaned in, and kissed her cheek before she could stop him. Then he got out of bed and crossed the room to retrieve his waistcoat, neckcloth, and jacket. Let us have some breakfast, shall we?

It was the oddest thing, but she was suddenly quite ravenous. You must leave at once afterward.

You have my word. You may rent one of the rooms if you wish to freshen up.

After bowing, he took his leave. When she reached for the bell pull, she realized she was smiling.

She looked better, much better, this morning. The circles were still there, but not as dark. He would see to it that she slept well tonight, so perhaps tomorrow they would be gone completely. And she was eating. It was ridiculous the pleasure that realization brought him.

She wore black. He wanted to see her in red.

-How long do you intend to stay in Landcaster? he asked.

Her brow furrowed; she glanced up at him. I am not sure. Another week or so I suppose. Not much longer. I dread returning to Herndon Hall. come to Grant wood.

With a sigh, she shook her head. Ansley' You have few memories of there. You do know it is quite rude to interrupt. my apologies. But I can decipher the objection written on your face. Hear me out.

So, extend to you a courtesy you do not extend to me? Why ever should I? You are irascible when you are with a child. you are stubborn, she said.

(Quiet.)

Like- we will discuss it during dinner this evening. so, you will join me? Did you ever doubt it?

His answer to her was merely a grin. He had not been teasing when he suggested she marry him, but based on her expression and response, she was still too fragile to consider such a proposal. He had won over her once before. He could do it again. It needed only a bit of patience.

No. Jannie could hardly believe the excitement that thrummed through her as she waited for Ansley to arrive. A night away from the oppressive house. She needed it. She knew that she did.

She wished she did not have to wear black, but it helped to remind her to remain somber. Tonight, was simply a break from mourning. It did not remove it altogether.

She was sitting in the parlor trying not to appear anxious when she heard the rap on the front door. Her butler was soon standing in the doorway. his Grace, the King of Ansley.

No. He bowed out and Ansley strode in, so dashing in his swallow-tailed coat that it very nearly took her breath. He had worn similar clothing last night, but for some reason, he appeared even more handsome now. Lest he decides to try to kiss her on the cheek, she lowered her veil.

I daresay, you did not have to go to so much bother for dinner with me, she said as she walked over to him.

Part:

He extended his arm. no bother.

She placed her hand on his arm and allowed him to escort her from the house. I have been looking forward to this, she confessed.

(As have I.)

He handed her up to the coach. As she settled onto her seat, he took his place opposite her. The coach's lantern was lit, allowing her to see him. She was surprised that he had not chosen to sit beside her. The last time they journeyed alone on his coach, they had been so close that a shadow could not have squeezed between them.

As the coach rattled over the cobblestones, she felt compelled to fill the silence. The air is less cloying tonight. It is better in the country. Do you not like the city, then? It serves a purpose, but I must confess that when I am married, I shall come to Rockville as little as possible. I prefer the outdoor activities offered in the countryside.

It was no doubt the reason he was so fit and that his skin was so bronzed. What is your favorite sport? she asked. Swimming. I recently had a small pool built at Grant wood. If you come to visit, I shall teach you how to swim.

She imagined the slickness of their wet bodies, gliding over each other. right now, I would no doubt sink straightaway to the bottom.

He grinned. I doubt it.

Although the curtains were drawn on the couch and she could not see the passing buildings, it did seem that they had been travelling for some time now. I did not think your residence was so far.

We will dine at my residence, but I have a little surprise planned first.

She had had far too many surprises of late. And what would that be? If I tell you, it will not be a surprise. This was not what we agreed to. Trust me, Jannie. You will enjoy what I have in mind.

She became aware of the clatter of more vehicles and Ansley's coach slowing. We are in the thick of it. you may peer out if you like, he said.

She considered it. I shall wait.

Eventually, the coach rolled to a stop. A footman opened the door and Ansley disembarked before handing her down.

They were in an alleyway, but still, she recognized the building.

Covent Garden? Are you mad? It is closed to the public tonight. then why are we here?

He smiled broadly. because it is open to us. I am in mourning. I cannot be entertained.

You shall not be. The actors are atrocious, from what I hear. Taking her hand, he led her toward the steps and a back door, where he knocked.

It opened and a wizened man peered out. Yours Grace me... Smith. this way, sir.

They went through back hallways and up two flights of stairs to a private box. Mr. Smith at once left them. Jannie eased down to a plush chair. Is this the royal box? no, it is mine, Ansley said as he joined her.

How did you manage this? easily. It could not have been easy. let us just say that I am a man of influence and leave it at that, shall we?

A man of influence, of wealth, of generosity. A modest man. She had been so afraid to trust the feelings she had developed for him during the month they were at Blackmon. Could it be that she had seen the real man there? Lights lit the stage.

The curtains were drawn back. Jannie leaned forward and allowed the actors to transport her to fair Verona.

He had considered paying the actors to perform a comedy. He was certain she needed some laughter, but in the end, he had decided that she needed to shed some tears. He had had a devil of time leaving her this morning.

He focused on her now. She was giving rapt attention to the performance, as though she was on stage with them. Her eyes had been filled with excitement when he arrived at the residence. It had done his heart good. The exorbitant amount he was paying for the private use of the theater was money well spent.

Theirs had been an unusual courtship, which began last November' even though he had not realized it was courtship at the time. Courting her now was a bit more difficult because of all the social mores that insisted she was in seclusion.

As the star-crossed lovers were mourned, he saw the tears begin to trickle down her cheeks. He wanted to wipe them away from himself, but tonight he intended to be only a friend. So, he handed her his handkerchief and watched as she delicately patted her face.

And then a heart-wrenching sob broke free. He moved in, wrapping his arms around her, turning her into his chest, holding her nearby. He knew her sorrow had nothing to do with the performance. She was weeping now for all she had lost and all that faced her.

~*~

I hate this, she said. I hate that I am all weepy. you have earned the right to cry.

Straightening, she eased back. It makes me feel weak. You are hardly weak.

He could see her studying his features, and he wondered where her thoughts wandered.

Taking a last swipe at her tears, she squared her shoulders. I suppose we should be off. Are you ready for dinner, then? I am quite famished.

Dinner took place in Ansley's garden, with candles flickering on the small round table, while the gas lamps sent out a soft glow. She could smell the roses, and from time to time she caught a hint of his fragrance. You have gone to a great deal of bother, she said. Not I. My servants. And I pay them well enough to do it.

The Cages, to her horror, had been exactly as they were named. They were cages, dome birdlike cages with iron workings. They swung several hands above the stony ground. He leered gloomily at the stone fortress that was the entrance to the prison, the cages were not in the Purgatory, they swung beside it. His fingers clutched at the iron rods desperately trying not to think of how her body would feel if it fell to the mean stones below. Her stomach rolled as a harsh wind made her cage rock dangerously.

Part:

The air whistled through the bars and slapped her cheeks. It was almost painful. She felt like a condemned bird that had been put on display before its execution. She sat high enough to see over the palace walls, but it was low enough that her food, water, and even another chamber pot could be popped up to her. She knew part of the reason she was up this high was that Biseal wanted her to have little contact with anyone as well as minimize her chances of escape. There was

little chance of that, both of her wrists had been shackled to the cage floor every time they rustled the guards would look at her questioningly. At least they were not cruel; if He knew better, she would even think they felt sorry for her. Her head pounded painfully, and she felt sicker, she needed to vomit but it would not come up. It just spread through her body leaving her weak and shaking harder than a dying note on a novice musician's lips.

The fire was the only thing burning in the King's room when She opened the door. The University must be using a lot of magic to know the mage lights out, again. He was going to have to be firm with them. He had been much too lenient with them. A sharp pain cut through his chest that he had to push away. All his training was not enough, but he could not let his grief get the better of him. Grief destroyed the weak and She knew he could not be weak. He would have kicked his ass if she had even suspected it. She was too kind, letting the University draw on needed magic and shut themselves away from the rest of the Median. He was going to have a serious talk with the Highest Basel.

Soon, tonight. No, not tonight but first thing in the morning before they all came to pound upon his door with their condolences. He did not want any of them, they were not fake grief-stricken faces for his behalf. They were pleas for mercy or at least they would be as soon as he found out what truly happened to Heania.

She collapsed into his chair before he fell. It had taken four days to make it back, the horses had almost broken from no rest. Honor must have thought he was insane, he felt like he was going insane. He had not slept in four days! How could he when he felt the blood-stilling fear of being hunted? He had felt it all, everything Heania had felt when that Thing chased her. It hunted her down to the right outside the Palace Temple. It let her get that far, to a place she thought she would be safe and killed her there. It is in the center of a dark hall.

Her head fell into his hands, it was not true. How could it be when he could still hear her voice when it was quiet? Like a loaf of bread for the starving. She felt starved with titbits of food being shoved his way. All of them were soaked in poison. 'She!' His voice had been desperate, scared too. 'I love you.'

He wanted to claw his eyes out, he never should have left her here, alone. He should have taken her with him and Ysterym be damned. He still would have had her, them, both. For Goddes's sake, she had been pregnant! And they had not cared, whoever had done this to her had not cared one way or another.

A strangled sound wrenched from his throat. He sounded like Alec when he was trying to get his audience's attention. Gods, poor Alec, the large adolescent guardian had to be sedated just so the priestess could collect Heania's body. They had taken her back to her room. She was there now but she would not be for very much longer. The spells woven over her body to keep it from decomposing would

unlock on the seventh day, the last day of mourning. Then he would have to let them build a prayer and let her burn.

A hard knock rapped on his door. It was not the door he had when he left. It was newer- he would never get to ask He why she had not liked the old one. 'Request an audience tomorrow!' he called. The knock came again. 'Enter!' they heard that.

A petite shadow slipped into the room clicking the door shut behind him. She tensed, who would dare not announce themselves. 'It is just me.' Nevaeh's husky voice filled the quiet room as she slipped the hood of her cloak back off her face. It was as he remembered. It was tightly drawn; her eyes were puffy as though she had been crying.

'I'll get a report in the morning Nevaeh- thank you.'

'I didn't come for that.' she said hastily. 'I just came to be sure you did nothing stupid, or rash.' he would have smiled at that once before. Now it just made him angry.

Part:

'I fear there is no energy in me to do either.'

'I'm sorry.' she seemed to falter, her eyes falling away from his direction.

'Lady Heania was...she was a gift.'

'Yes, she was.' and she was gone. My wife is gone. Regret stabbed him so deep he wished he could turn to something, anything, to ease it. A prayer, a bottle of ale, a knife. None of them would ease this burden.

The silence stretched for a moment more, until She was sure that Nevaeh would leave. He was not company to be had at all. Lily and Honor had long ago retreated under his rage, the whole council had accepted his return and quivered under it. 'You should sleep.' Nevaeh's hand touched his arm, not pulling away even when he flinched. 'Please?'

'How can I sleep when I can't even think of anything else beside Her.' he asked not meaning to appeal to Nevaeh but found little choice but to ask someone.

'Company helps.' Nevaeh shrugged a little unladylike for her perfect facade. She was too perfect in everything she did. In her words, in her duty, in her skills, he had taught her. If she had been a mage, she would have placed her over the University a long time ago. 'If you would like, I'll stay the night with you.' she would not be much company herself with her swollen eyes and hollowed cheeks. 'I just- I wouldn't want to be alone at a time like this.'

'Of course, you can stay, you're one of the only people I would allow to see me torn apart.'

She ran a tired hand through his hair. 'I can't show weakness.' not with the city already so divided. The University was determined to split the city in two

between magic and temples. The City's people loved his wife, from the temples to the pickpockets. The palace had a heart that blended soured milk for her. It was like his mother all over again; her disappearance had torn apart the country. What would He's death do?

'That's how they destroyed He.' Nevaeh's small voice flitted to She's ears. He was on his feet in a heartbeat. His hands gripped her shoulders wanting to shake her.

'What!'

'She was going to have a baby- they would never allow a bastard to be crowned heir when so many others wanted the damn seat.' Nevaeh shook her head blinking back unshed tears. 'She showed a weakness when she announced that.'

'It was not a bastard! It was mine!' She found himself roaring. 'He was never like that- never.'

'I don't doubt that.' Nevaeh shook her head gently, taking his hands. 'She talked about you like you were the next sunrise when she wasn't cursing your name.' He wanted to smile but did not dare.

Nevaeh's body trembled a bit, all the unshed tears finally caved in on her. They rolled down her cheeks unchecked. 'I am so sorry! Forgive me?' she would have thrown herself to his feet if She had not caught her.

'What for?'

'I just left her; she told me to take Alec and go to bed. I did not think to stay with her and now...' She shook her head as she shook his head.

'Nevaeh that was a Golemn, it would have killed you too as surely as it did Heania. It is not your fault. Whoever made it will bear all the blame.' and all his wrath because there would be no mercy, none. 'Come on your shaking.' She pulled the cloak off her to give her a blanket he favored on cool nights. It was no wonder she was shivering when all she wore was her simple nightgown. Her hair was so tousled he was certain she had tried to sleep and could not. Her voice was husky because she had woken up from bad dreams in tears. Poor Nevaeh. 'Sit.' He tried to put her in a seat, Nevaeh simply shook her head. Her eyes were cast on the flames. They danced to her eyes and cheeks until they glowed.

'I want to stay, but we both need to get some rest. She, before the sun comes up, they will be at this door.' she pointed. 'They can't see that your half blind with grief.' She pulled him towards his bed.

'Lay with me,' he froze, his whole body jerking unsure that he had heard her right.

She stopped too, looking over her shoulder at him with a frown. 'It is nothing but comfort, so we do not have to be alone. Alone with our guilt.'

-And-

'What will this give us?' she asks, shaking his head.

'A false peace.' Nevaeh shrugged. 'Just for the night, I promise.' Nevaeh always kept her promise. He had nothing else to do but drown in his grief. His wife was dead and beyond his help. Nevaeh heard and all but begging for comfort. Something they both needed.

She waited patiently, one hand innocently clutching the cover over her thin nightdress. She was his friend, but she was not a child. He would be foolish to think of Nevaeh as a child when he had seen her bring grown men to their knees. He would do anything for her, even this. He wanted to do this. It was a way to forget. 'Here.' he pulled her closer, away from his bed. He did not want her there yet.

Nevaeh went without protest. She came to him letting his hands touch her puffy face, her hair, her chest. When he pulled her close, he felt her soft mouth kiss his shoulder, the base of his neck. His skin flushed under her warm breath as her head leaned against the chest. Little moans escaped her mouth as his hands slid down her body coming back up with the hem of her gown until it came off over her head.

Someone sighed, Nevaeh did as they heard the gown fall to the floor. She could not help looking at her, her bronzed skin just seemed to glow in the firelight that also added a reddish haze to her deep brown hair that covered her face from sight.

'She.' Nevaeh said hesitantly reaching up to wrap her arms around him. Her lips planted kisses on his arms, shoulders, his cheek as she lifted on tiptoes to reach his ear. 'I-' a blood-stopping scream filled the room. Right into She's ear as he threw the source halfway across the room. His hands went to cover his ears to keep the horrible screams out. They just got louder and louder until he was sure the whole palace would wake.

'Nevaeh stop- don't!' she just screamed and would not stop. It was not her voice at all. It was a higher shriller. It was the scream of someone whose heart was breaking letting in all the fear and terror the Gods gave into it.

Then she closed her eyes to the setting sun; she tried not to think of it as possibly the last sunset she would ever see. Her eyes wanted to burn from her head.

She just waited to scream away her headache and give over into it all. All He did was whimper. 'Lady,' someone hissed. He ignored it like the wind. Until it came again. 'Lady!' The voice was daringly loud. A guard was trying for attention.

Nevaeh's naked body lay crumpled on the floor as her screams continued to pierce the night until he wanted to join in with her.

'Heania!'

Interval: 5 Ghosted

Chapter: 15

Cantankerous

Maiara Chenoa- Nevaeh that sweet little girl that you, away thought was not a little girl, she found death records and took the place of to have a child life that she lost, yet still did not have, she is always 30 years old living with dwarfism she was the only one that knew.

I think I have died! In my death, I saw the revenge of Nevaeh to Hope how was the fallen angel that snatched me up in my death from this world holding her 36-inch-long bloody ruby incrustated sword to mock her with the only the silly power she could have to defend with, with black bloody wings one ripped off her punishment of being part of the underworld is that she will never fly her side ribs ripped open and showing no heart within the cavity, and her name scribed into her lower back forever shamed by being fully nude, as Nevaeh was made to be by her mean-spiritedness. Better sweet to me to see. Always, taking her skin off like Nevaeh's past clothing from her fallen body. Therefore I- Maiara Chenoa will have eventually like intertwined twisted willow branches, overground Nevaeh for years with hopeful energy like strong roots like the bow and aero.

Oh, the road to hell along the way, the path is paved with good intentions, so others say upon this chapter of my ever-changing life, consequently when the time arrives in the sun will not kiss my face, tell the ones who grieved enough. That I left this place when I saw her again.

A distant wailing scream, horribly cheap, of somewhere under the twilight, had prevented me. Magnificent yearnings drifting leap, abrading at custom's chain. Ditto of its brumal slumber. Wakens the ferine struggle.

The complex lines stood immediately approaching duration. Around out beyond in the snowfall, concealed from his display by trees and shrubberies.

Unlighted spruce groves sulked on each rival the iced lake way. The trees became dismantled by a novel breath of their white topping of frost, plus they resembled to lean approaching each other, black and sinister, in the paling daylight.

Some immense quietness was managed over the land. The property itself was a demolition, lackluster, airy journey, so lonesome and bitter that the quality of it was not indeed that regarding oppression.

There was a reference in this of giggling although of a roaring exceeding frightening than any melancholy, a burst of mirthless laughter is as the simper of the mythical creature with the head of a human... a falcon, a burst of laughter frozen as the blight and participating in the grimness of faithfulness.

The diamonds from their frosted whiff that their faces outside were not discernible to my mind, as I passed in handcuffs. This provided them with the seeming of ghostlike masques, morticians in a phantom world at the obsequies like any spirits.

The ghostly glimmer of the slightly overcast day continued working to fade meanwhile a soothing faraway shout awoke in the noiseless atmosphere.

Then toiled without speech beyond the profiles of the chilled ambiance. Every stillness was uninterrupted save by the shrieks of their pursuers, that, hidden, dangled upon my back like chains of their hands.

The screams appeared closer as the pursuers drew in according to their custom, and the tyrants turned apprehensive and terrified including remained licentious of alarms that complicated the evidence furthermore additional pessimistic.

This towered skyward with a flying hurry, until it relinquished its topmost degree, anywhere this continued, palpitant moreover rigid, moreover before gradually rotted away. It might have been a lost soul wailing; had it not been entrusted with a positive pitiable fierceness moreover greedy anticipation.

I was already superimposed night dismal, while I considered, infirm and fatigued, additionally, common an unusual and singular volume of forgotten lore.

This I persisted employed infancy, but no syllable representing before each person whose burning eyes now burned into my bosom's kernel; this and more I sat prophesying, including my head at prosperity reclining on the cushion's velvet covering that the lamplight celebrated o'er, exactly whose velvet violet quilting among the lantern sparkle celebrating o'er.

Its requirement is explained that not by word nor function had I delivered myself produce to ponder my goodwill. I maintained, as was my want to smile in all the ghostly presentations, and I did not observe that my grin now transpired near every knowledge of their immolation.

My eyes were closed but a few minutes later the pain was burning from the cold. I had traveled little more than a hundred yards, pushed by them. Flung it back, by the air, and frost, that seemed to mutter ominously in my face and laugh in my ears. Emitted a profound, warning whistle. I turned furthermore crammed before unobtrusively standing. I jogged with a characteristic, accelerating, offhand gait. Ever- so frustrated, forcing up its energy and viewing them steadily with noses that shivered as it contracted and inquired the fragrance of them looking at me.

Suddenly, remarkably newfangled thoughts continued the visions of the afterlife, yet there was a disaster occurring.

After searching for scrutiny for words, I did not have any. Then met by a bundle of spruce trees, moreover with apprehension and scent studied the outlay of the vigilant persons, it gazed at them in a surprisingly soulful tone, after the manner of a puppy; without in its wistfulness, there remained none of the puppy love.

It remained a wistfulness reproduced of appetite, as brutal as its fangs, as relentless, remorseless, cruel, and pitiless, as the frost itself as I stroll to my what I call my witch- trial and tribulation of judgment.

A spasm of fear went through me with wistfulness vanishing, being superseded by a predatory noxiousness that made me shudder.

The door burst open to bright lights.

(6 months back before the end)

Maddie- I remember sitting in the courtroom daydreaming about being so pore that I had to eat me cum, yet I would anyways every time I would DYI- YES in Vibrating, yet all girls do this! Liv was already shot by the hands of a Jude before my eyes for sex videos, just moments before, the here and now, for being gay and too outspoken- and friends of Karly Barnes a now convalescent, somehow, I knew I was next.

Then at that moment, there was a girl behind a white mask covering her whole face, I was obtuse, my eyes blacked out, she was sitting next to me yet more than six feet apart from me.

Including this feature in my memories, her body is covered in a floral dress.

Furthermore, with a hood covering the back of her head.

The only thing that was cut out and the mouth was just a small slit. There was no skin showing at all on her body, covering the entire face of this thought of being younger than me.

I was sitting all by myself like a simpleton, held as the hostage, in a dreamlike state of mind, all the people's faces were stretching to my sight, I was in the courthouse convicted of a crime. I am here for the crime of being racist, and free to love whom I wanted, before the radicalized change to the law, and not wanting to protest the new world orders, of having our soldiers attacking the peaceful.

This girl started talking to me, many questions fanatic nonsensical, in the middle of a pandemic, face-covering are mandated yet not like this, over the fact of defunding the police officers there were none in the courtroom, and the law was my witch hunt. I remember in the moment of a small chat, with no-intent what-so-ever, I questioned why she had a full-face mask.

Then she said, this was what I was waiting for someone to ask why? She pulled a small gun, 'the right to express freely, not a question but a right.' Now they all almost die over you if you do not give me all your money.

My mind drifted back to when I was 13 in the moment of thinking about death to the time it was Christmas and I was in PJs just like my sister, and it was early morning and Kellie and I ran down the steps, to the fireplace, and my dad had a dildo for us both girls as stocking stuffers, along with Killie thong underwear, Over the fact he walked into 9-year-old Kellie's and room and now she was a woman, and she was bouncing on a Perfume can masturbating.

Before the trial, I put everything that I own in the chest in the back, take it freely, and let me go. I have paid for my sins in my debt to society, and I am not racist. I have the right like you do to feel and believe in my free thoughts and speech.

The judge doltish did not say a word, the crowd did not move, and somehow, I had to buy my freedom to my town, or I would be executed on the spot, not by this girl, that was a diversion, by the judge that had me sitting Infront of him asking for his mercy. And, at gunpoint.

Liv- at the gates to face my fate, the light bright, I see Nevaeh, I hear this sweet voice, one of faith something- I never, lost- even if in the darkest days of my lives, he said to me you have saved so many for a horrible life, and gave them another, you have made it to the kingdom of the Heaven's.

-And-

All that you have saved I feel must be saved as white angels, all that was deprived has been overlooked, I am forgiving to all and love all even if you must earn it, as you did so well.

Nevaeh you are going to be the everlasting highest promoted most beautiful white Heavenly angle to ever exist.

-And-

I passed on to the other side- in the rays spinning around my body
pulling me in at last to the holy ghost- and heavenly father, praying hands above us
both, I was hugged and welcomed, by him as a child that is most loved and
understood, like all of them to that were the misunderstood- and rejected.

(Some season has come and passed)

Karly, I walked around the city, knowing I should not- in my condition
just weeks before everything- looked different to me- I walked past ash-covered
hospital, and all the glass shattered to the road under my feet from rebates and
protesters.

Just- to think of this building covering a long white and glass ten-story
hospital, this was all my town had, is going to be wasted away to decay when it was
new and modern, and the blast from the bombs makes it unusable.

Part:

(One year back)

'Um likewise, there are consequences, if you linger past the rising moon
only in your mind or someone else's, you'll lose like me you lose your mind and
become a mermaid form forever,'

I will need familial consent not to do anything, even just to go to the
beach with friends.' Karly said, rising, and searching through a box of college

applications, 'I'll only be onshore for a few more days, yet I will not remember,' I remember that I fingered my crystal necklace as it always did when I am stressed, 'my home I did not remember it today, where it is, it won't take me an hour, to get there.'

I opened my purse and spilled out my crystal seahorse collection, which slowly sank onto the sand at my feet, like the princess I am not about to let three snobby clones wreck it for me, even if they now think I am crazy.

Of course, I rejoin magnanimously, trailing my head slightly now if you will pardon me, it is too bad, Liv interrupts, I freezing this was meant to be an escape Maddie agrees Too, too bad Too, too bad, Karly is lost in her world of being traumatized.

Acknowledgments, I say as they lead me into an open spot of the party area in front of the sea those three almost put me to shame, as they tug me away, I glance back over my shoulder, the look of utter shock on their faces is the best moment of the night, in the Bahamas, I know what Bimini is I have one on now, I explain It's in the eastern part of my kingdom, Aunt Rachel takes a sip of her iced tea, and looks at my friends saying, 'I think there is no hope for her at this point.'

They hugged me with their might, not letting go, I stroked my hair, my heart pounded, I am sure they could feel it pulse out of my chest and beat against their own, I almost did not want to calm down. It felt so good, being so close to them.

‘But just how are you planning to get around now that you have ditched me. I mean, in case you have not noticed, this is not back home where you can run around freely in your case, you cannot get anywhere without having a motorbike, and you are not able.’

Even though I am still mad at them for the whole Olivia revelation thing and the whole conspiring with Maddie thing, saving me from the terrible trio thing is enough to cool my anger a little, and then I blacked out. To the point of waking up in the hospital room a little more than a one-year letter.

They look at me, occupied by my surge of lighter, which is not exactly the reaction I had prearranged on. ‘What is wrong with the bus? It is free and I could go.’

I- Karly per imbecilic, shaking my head, simply accepting my ears. Furthermore, since when do you worry about cost, Missy?

‘Yes, I remember being a fascinating shallow, money-oriented, self-absorbed, buyer-driven slob?’

‘No!’ I bellow, shaking my head and squeezing her three fingers in my one hand hard.

Wishing to change her even though I did mean it- not being mean yet truthful. Deliberated Liv. ‘I just-’ I squint, wishing I could be even half as articulate as her, but still forging ahead when I say, ‘I guess I just don’t get it.’ I shrug.

I raise my hand to where I can see. 'Isn't it obvious?' Only not in a bad way like she thinks, or you are indeed. She shakes her head and pulls me toward the door.

But I just stay put, refusing to budge. Nothing is obvious... Nothing makes sense anymore. Remember at one time, she had my old boyfriend in her bed, and I acknowledged all the finer things in life kind of thing, and less in my girlfriend's now she is the version of what I am looking for in that kind of way, even if a girl?

She pauses, hand on the knob, more than a little hurt when she says, 'I thought it was a satisfactory solution for now. But you'd prefer I not touch you at all?'

'Not at all!' I spoke.

'That's not what I intended!'

'You're not the same girl anymore Kar.' Said Maddie.

Part:

(Back at school)

Nevaeh- I shivered, pulling the quilt closer around me. My fingers plucked at the stitches on my neck. Never again would another person, I pledged this one thing to myself. No one would hurt anyone the way they had.

It did not sound demonstrative even to my ears. Rearranging telepathy to all that I linger within the while some classmates approach the castle for the first time, prompting her how arduous it has been withdrawing any skin-on-skin contact for the last three days.

‘I mean, I know we can’t risk any accidental palm sweat exchange or anything with this new pandemic taking place in the world, like that, but still, don’t you think it looks kind of-odd?’ I whisper, the second we are alone again if only in our minds.

Fantasizing, I had a cold when we both knew we did not get sick, and other ludicrous brush techniques that left me feeling genuinely uncomfortable.

It has been tortured, pure, and simple. To have a girlfriend so gorgeous I miss being home here in this realm, so sexy, so amazingly awesome-and to not be worthy to touch her-is the worst kind of agony, it is going to be nice to be in a world, unlike Earth as of late.

I ran for hours, trying to get as far home as I could. I spun around quicker than I ever have, wishing for the first time to have standard ears. I permanently could not take the pain any longer. Of all the cries from Earth. The look on my face, I knew it would haunt me for the rest of my overlong life. I was wondering why the Earth was ending.

Teleported to my world, my fingers twitch slightly with impatience, eager to get moving to have my wings under me and fly around the castle that I have made for girls like me. And soon I will well be seeing more of them like never before.

Spinning, in the first year, dresses swishing along the way, I would know that voice anywhere of young girls that are just like me. Her eyes were dancing with amusement, looking down on them, engaging me to deny it.

I smiled at the ceiling plus then back at her 'Better get to class before your late girls.' I say softly. Furthermore, make sure to take excellent studies. You always do, I believe in you. That is why you are here.'

A small smile forms on my lips as I cherish the last time flying with all the others around me. Some are thoroughly horrid at flying over being young and new to their wings, and it did not help that I wanted to pick up speed.

While I soared smoothly, on the other hand, my clenched hands were opposed to the wings being like my salvation.

I am not a very considerate person myself, but all the while I still tried to turn my laughs into coughs and help all the others to the safety of the ground.

The sun was beginning to fade, setting a luminous light over the castle grounds. Then she denounced me while her feet brushed solidly.

My flesh throbbed from the chilly air whooshing by me, and then also for hours of flying, but it was not abhorrent.

I retracted my wings and started walking towards the entrance.

Then glancing at all the stained-glass windows, I am unsurprised to see it is dinnertime, and all the girls are lined up in the hall ready to eat. Just the thought of food lifted my spirits.

Annoyed and still having a grumbling stomach, I sauntered my way over them all, not taking notice of the illumination from the gothic lamps.

I start the walk to the small but comforting sitting area in a niche. I was endlessly Millie the House Elf's always made extras.

~*~

She squeezes my fingers and opens the door with her mind, leading me right past Emmah and the other girls as we head for our desks.

Seeing the world that I once came from coming to its end as we look through the porthole to Earth, 'no,' I no longer care and close it off forever, in its final days, if anything as you know, I was the liability in letting it get to this point is God.

‘I don’t care about that.’ Her gaze was open, sincere, and fixed right on mine. ‘I do not care what other people think here or there. I only care about you girls, that is why I have saved you and brought you here.’

And even though, I have not seen her since Friday when she woke from me being Naddalin and giving a spell for her to sleep, I when into find Karly coming back to her spirit, eyes ripped open to mine and her soul in her new body with us, her hand-shredded up fast to my face. I am sure her horror concerning me has not dismayed me a bit, in her way of thinking of me.

But just because she ignores me does not mean I can relax or trust that it is over the dislike she has for me.

Because the truth is, it is never over with Emmah. Emmah made that abundantly clear, she was going to befriend Karly.

If anything, she is more replenished and sinful than ever, making the little pardon nothing more distinguished than the calm before the storm.

‘I see that you have gotten used to your new body,’ said Emmah to Karly in the spirit body of Naddalin.

‘Ignore her,’ Naddalin whispers as the mind within being Karly, her first day has begun... walking to class in the numerous corridors and halls and classrooms.

Although while I am completely braced for her frequent ploy of abandoning her bookbag in my trail to trip me- today... she is too bewildered by Naddalin's new expression to play that stale old pastime; I see the girl within the body shine through.

Karly in the body of Naddalin seems lost and scared, scooting her desk so close the edges practically overlap Emmah's.

Do you know why you are in this body?

'No.' said Karly.

'You have earned it.' Said Emmah.

Naddalin's unhurried gaze traveled the length of her, from her head to her toes, before starting all over again.

Part:

Naddalin- Besides even though I nod as though I am, the truth is- I cannot. As much as I would love to pretend, she is invisible- I cannot do it. She is beside me.

Emmah- She is in front of me now and I am completely obsessed.

Peering into Naddalins thoughts, required to see what if anything occurred amidst them.

Because even though I comprehend Naddalin's accountability for all the flirting, and caressing, and holding, I ought to have no choice but to watch me fall in love with her.

Indeed, though I comprehend for a fact, that Naddalin was entirely denied free will- that does not diminish the fact that it happened- that Naddalin's lips pressed against her while her hands roved her skin.

Furthermore, even though I am tolerably sure it did not go any further than that, I would still sense a heck of a lot thoroughly, if I could just get some ammunition to back up my argument.

Furthermore, notwithstanding how crazed, dangerous, and masochistic it is- I will not stand continuously her consciousness gives, and each last shocking, piercing, intense detail is eventually exposed.

I am about to investigate more mysterious progress to the extreme core of her genius, when Naddalin clutches my hand and responds, 'Always, please be here for me. Stop irritating yourself by not doing so.

I have previously told you, there's annihilation to see.' I gulp carefully, contemplate fixed on the rear of her head, regarding her scandal with Jewell and Mireille, barely listening as she adds, 'It did not happen. It is not what you think.'

‘I believed you couldn’t memorize?’ I utilize, overwhelm with confusion the moment I see the sadness in her perceptions as she looks at me and rocks her head.

‘Simply confer to me.’ She breathes audibly. ‘Or at least try to. Please?’

I sniff strongly, staring at her, requesting I could, apprehending I should.

‘Completely, invariably. Primary you could not get over the past century years of my dating, and now you are preoccupied with last week?’

She almost connects her brows and bends closer, the voice demanded, tempting, as she appends, ‘I know that your emotions are hurt. Truly, I do. Exactly what has done is prepared. I cannot go back; I cannot improve it. Naddalin’s done on purpose- you cannot let her acquire it.’

I gulp hard, remembering she is valid. I am acting laughable, silly, enabling myself to deviate way off track. Additionally, Naddalin thinks, shifting to telepathy she is a lesgirls like I am also, now that our teacher, Mr. Robins to understands Elemental magic, Escapology, and Levitation, has reached. You know it is insignificant.

The only one I have ever become loved is yourself. Isn’t that sufficient?

She realizes her gloved thumb to my temple, contemplating into my eyes as she explains to me our memoir of all things enchanted... from her past world as Karly the Goddess of the sea.

Then ultimately, accepting the truth-my fear that she will someday tire of the gloved handholding, the telepathic embrace, and strive out the real thing in a common girl with safe DNA.

My multiple flesh-and-blood as seeing all the newborn servant girls from France, all daughter impressive girls prompted me of how successful I was.

It was correct to be back, eyes wide, I goggle, never ought to detect that careful life before, I think back, in class and wonder.

Although she just beams, gazes turning warmer as she explains to me the highlights of that age, a fleet clip of the significance we met at an attendance possibility in a past life, our first kiss just outside of the hall that very same night. Manifesting only the most Dadaistic consequences and pitying my death, which always, inevitably, comes before we can proceed.

Furthermore, after viewing all those beautiful flashes unwind, her unabashed passion for me set bare to see, I contemplate into her discriminations, acknowledging her enigma when I recollect: Of passage, it is rather. You have perpetually been enough.

Then joining them in embarrassment when I add: But am I perfect for you?

She then signals, gloved forefingers cupping my chin as she infers me into a mental embrace so tender, so innocent, so encouraging, all my fears slip away.

R.S.V.P to the explanation in my gaze as she pitches forward, lips at my ear as she responds, 'Immeasurable. Now that such is settled, on Naddalin...'

Because while I have not seen or spoken with them except for last Friday, my entire world fell apart and there is no uncertainty, I left them both on a lonely note.

'Mr. Milley?' I said along with saying, I said to him in explaining my thoughts. My last contact with Milley consisted of me going all sentimental and not only confiding my psychic powers-which is something I never do-but also encouraging her to date me, which is something I am seriously starting to regret. Furthermore, as tremendous as that was, it is only challenged by my last minutes with Naddalin when I proposed my fist at her belly button chakra, resolved not just to kill her but to defeat her.

Moreover, I would have too- except for the point that I completely suffocated, and she got away. And even though in retrospect that worked out for the best, I am still so irritated with her, who is to say I will not try over?

While I make my way toward the history of the world-class, I am querying which will be worse- seeing but the accuracy is, I grasp I will not try again.

Besides not just because Naddalin who is Karly, now that Nevaeh is back in her own body, anyway she spent the whole of English class telepathically lecturing me on how malice is never the key, how karma is the only true justice system. And plenty more blah- blah- blah- like that- but mostly because it is not honest.

Even though Naddalin tricked me in the very worst way, leaving me no reason to ever trust her again-I still do not have the right to kill her over it.

It will not solve my problem. Will not alter a thing. Even though she is prodigious, evil, and everything that totals up to immoral, I still do not hold the right to do this... She slinks up beside me, all fair tousled hair, water's edge blue eyes, and shiny white teeth loosened stretching her strong, bronzed arm across the classroom door, preventing me from getting bounded.

Furthermore, that is all it takes.

Though I will not, still if, still if,

I vowed Naddalin I could get myself harmlessly to and from class outwardly resorting to such.

‘Consequently, direct me, eternally, how was your weekend? Did you and Naddalin enjoy a nice homecoming of having Nevaeh back in her own body and the homecoming of Karly in the body of Naddalin?’

Was she able to survive you by chance?’

I clenched my fists by my sides, visualizing how she would look like nothing more than a heap of designer clothes and a pile of dust, despite the vow of nonaggression I took.

She then responds, contemplates thickening on mine, decreasing her voice to a murmur as she continues, ‘Not to suffer though, you will not be single for long.

Once the conventional grieving phase concludes, I will be thrilled to step in and fill up the void of her loss.’

I concentrate on my sigh, depositing its potential and regularity as I understand in the strong golden, robust arm hindering my path, comprehending all it would take is one well-placed self-defense chop to split it in half.

‘Hell, also if you did endure to endure back and sustain her to be alive, all you ought to do is answer the message, and I am right by your side.’ She smiles, eyes feeding over me most lovingly.

‘Although no requirement to reply too swiftly or perpetrate yourself, however. Take if you like, For the understanding that, Continuously, I swear you, unlike the old Naddalin, I am a woman who cannot wait to see where this is all agreeing to go.

Furthermore, it is just a resolution of time before you come looking for me nevertheless.’

‘There’s only one element I want from you.’

I narrow my gaze continuously, everything encompassing us dim. ‘Furthermore, that’s toward you to leave me solely.’ Thoughts rise to my face as her gaze increases to an ogle.

‘Farid not, love.’ She smirks, studying me over and swinging her head. ‘Trust me, you want way more than such. But not to suffer, it is like I conversed, I will deliver for as long as it needs.

It is Naddalin I am anxious about. And you should suffer too. From what I saw in the last century, she is a troubled person. The portion of a hedonist. Did not wait for much of anything so notably as I could tell.’

I- Emmah, swallow hard and strive to keep calm, reminding myself not to fall for her bait. Naddalin has a knack for locating my weakness, my psychological strength, and lives to exploit it.

‘Do not get me wrong, she has always been one to keep up entrances-wearing the armbands that are black and white stripes, appearing inconsolable at the wake-but trust me, Ever, the moss had not time to adhere to her shoe before she was back on the lurk.

Looking to drown her sorrows in whatever or-should I say whomever-her could. And even though you prefer not to believe it, take it from someone who has been there all along. Naddalin waits for no one. And she certainly never waited for you.’

I take a deep breath, filling my head with words, music, mathematical equations stretching far beyond my skills, anything to drown out the expressions that are like prudently honed missiles aimed orderly for my soul.

‘Yep.’

‘Perceived this with my own eyes, I did!’

Smirking as her underclothing into a viscous cockney articulation and back out over. ‘Haven noticed this also.

It broke her poor non-beating

Willing to take her back no matter where she had been, no questions asked.

Though, unlike me-and, I am afraid, quite unlike you have not loved was unconditional. Which, let us face it, is something you would never do.'

'That's not correct!' I screamed, cried hoarsely, furthermore very dry, as though it was the first time that I have used it all day- it was so bad.

'I've had Naddalin since the moment we met-I-' I stop, knowing I should not have started. It is useless to engage in the fight.

'Sorry, darlin,' but you are wrong. You have never- ever had Naddalin at all. A pure kiss here, a bit of sweaty handholding there-' She shrugs, gaze contemptuously.

'Forever, you think some pathetic attempts at second base can satisfy an avaricious, self-absorbed, self-indulgent bloke like her? For four hundred years no less?'

Part:

I swallow hard, forcing a calm I do not own when I say, 'That's a lot further than you ever got with Haven.'

'No thanks to you,' her spits, harsh gaze on mine. 'But it's like I said, I'm a man who can wait.'

'Naddalin is not.'

She shakes her head.

‘Shame you are so-o strong-minded to play hard to get. You and I are a lot more alike than you think. Both of us are pining for someone we will never truly have-’

‘I could-’ I suck in my breath, not wanting her to know what only Naddalin and I know, that targeting an immortal’s weakest chakra, one of the body’s seven energy centers, is the quickest way to obliterate them.

‘I could kill you right now,’ I whisper, voice shaky, hands trembling, even though I promised Naddalin I would not do the, even though I know better.

‘Slug me in my sacral center, perhaps?’

‘You could what?’ She smiles at me, faces impending so close her breath chills my cheek.

I gape, wondering where she could’ve erudite that.

Nonetheless, she just giggles, shaking her head saying, ‘Do not forget, Liv, Naddalin was under my spell.

which means she told me everything, answered every question I am asked-including a good bit about you.’

She got me... Right where it counts. And do not think she does not know it.

I stand there, refusing to react, figured out to appear composed, unruffled-but it is too late.

‘No worries, Liv. ‘I am having far too much fun watching you squirm to attempt something like that.

Just a moment later- ‘I’ve no plans to go after you- she said.’

Besides, it will not be long ’til you are squirming beneath me.

Or even on top of me. Either will do.’ She laughs, her eyes on me, gazing at me in a way so knowing, so intimate, so deep, my stomach cannot help but have.

‘I will leave the details to you. But no matter how much you may want to, you will not go after me either. Mostly because I do have what you want. The cure for what you suffers from. I assure you of that, said Naddalin. You are just going to have to find a way to earn it, she also said. You are just going to have to show me how bad you want it.’

I gape, dry-mouthed and slack-jawed, remembering last Friday when Naddalin claimed the very same thing, to me saying that she likes owned me, and in a way, I am okay with that.

So-0 distracted by Naddalin awakening- I forgot all about it ’til now- to have it type down as another chapter in the book of my life.

I- Emmah press my lips together as my gaze meets heir's... awe- my hope rising for the first time in days.

Knowing it is just a matter of time until the antidote is mine. I just need to find a way to get it from her.

‘Oh, look at that.’ She grins. ‘Seems you forgot all about our date with destiny.’

Part:

She elevates her arm and I start to plow through, then she reduces it just as speedily, giggling as she locks me in place.

‘Deep sighs,’ her coos, lips brushing the rim of my ear, fingers skimming over my collar, leaving an icy cold furrow in their path. ‘No obligation to fear.

No need to get all tempered over.

I am certain that among us, we can come to some sort of shared bargaining, find a way to work something out.’

I narrow my gaze, bothered by the rate that she is set, words slow and unadventurous when I say, ‘Nothing you could ever say or do could turn me to sleep with you!’

As Milley opens the door, letting the whole class overhear.

‘Whoa-h’ Naddalin laughs, hands raised in pretend acknowledgment of disappointment as she backs into the room. ‘Who said anything about bumping’ most formidable, companion?’

She will thrust her head back and howl, enabling her eerie Ouroboric mark to flash in and out of view and move as if coming to life.

‘I mean, not to mislead you, darlin,’ however, if it is an immeasurable shag I am after, virgins about the last place I would look!’

I storm toward my desk, cheeks burning, gaze fixed on the floor, spending the next forty minutes cringing as my classmates burst into hysterics every time Naddalin directs a disgusting wet smooch sound my way, despite Milley’s numerous attempts to quiet them down.

-And-

The moment the bell rings, I make a run to the door. Frantic to get to Naddalin before Naddalin can be convinced Naddalin will push her too far and she will snap- an act neither of us can afford now that Naddalin holds the key.

Nonetheless- just as I turn the knob I hear, ‘Always? Got a minute?’ Her uncivil guffawing loitering dilatory as I turn approaching Milley to see what she needs.

Nonetheless- just as I turn the knob I hear, ‘Always? Got a minute?’ Her uncivil guffawing loitering dilatory as I turn approaching Milley to see what she needs.

I reflect, classmates bunching up behind me, anxious to come to the hall where they can follow Naddalin’s lead and mock me some more.

‘I did this.’ She smiles, sentiment solid, speech afraid, but still keen for me to know.

I double-clutch sharply, migrating my bag from one collar to the next, hoping I had caught the time to acquire indirect viewing so-o I could grasp an eye on the lunch tables and guarantee Naddalin sticks to the plan.

‘I approached her. Quite like what you advised me to.’ She reacts.

I glare, renewing my focus to her, gut-churning as I begin to explain. I observed her the daylight on the date had reached.

We even considered for a while, and-’ she shrugs, gazes sailing tirelessly, unmistakably still exercised by the conclusion. I attain ere her, exhausted, understanding I should settle it, whatever it demands ere it gets out of knack.

‘Furthermore, you remained accurate. She is pleasant to me. I shouldn’t perceive you, but we are having banquet tonight.’

I nod, unfeeling, shell-shocked, the information seeing over me as I peer into her enthusiasm furthermore observe it release in her head: she is reaching in the line of the cafeteria bulky hall with all its stain glass windows and gothic feel of a castle, minding her own business until Milley approaches-causing her to turn and grant her a smile that's- shamefully flirtatious!

Besides that, there is no remorse at all. Those two could not be more comfortable. At least not on Sabine's part. Nor Milley for that circumstance. No, regret is all mine.

This bottle falls. For too many reasons to introduce the dinner can never take place. One of them being that she is not just my aunt, but my guardian, my caretaker, my only living relative in the entire world!

-And-

Another, even more urgent reason, is the fact that thanks to my pathetic, mauling, overly sentimental, ill-advised moment of weakness last Friday, Milley knows I am psychic while she does not!

I have gone to great lengths to keep my secret from her, and there is no way I am going to be outed by my love-struck history teacher of enchanted.

Although just as I am concerned to tell her that she unquestionably penitentiary, supporting any circumstances whatsoever, take my aunt to dinner furthermore communicate any message I sway have unwittingly acknowledged

when a weak minute when I was sure I would nevermore see her again, she disentangles her esophagus and says, ‘Anyway, you should get to lunch before it is too delayed. I did not mean to catch you the long, I just guessed.’

‘Oh, no, it’s okay,’ I say. ‘I merely’

Although she does not let me terminate. Pushers me out the entrance as she waves me away, declaring, ‘Proceed on now. To find your colleagues. I just imagined I should bless you, that is sole.’

When I get to the lunch table, I sit beside Naddalin, relieved to find everything as normal as any other day. Naddalin’s gloved hand clutches my knee as I quickly scan the campus, looking for Naddalin as she thinks: she is withdrawn.

Gone? I peer, wishing her medians gone as in not throughout, as opposed to going as in a pile of ashes.

Nevertheless, Naddalin just giggles, the smooth sweet sound echoing from her head to mine. Not demolished. I swear to you. Just-absent-that is all. I drove off a rare seconds ago with some guy I’ve never- ever observed before.

Did you speak...?

Did she try to inspire you?

Naddalin swings her head, her eyes scrutinizing into mine as I add: Good. Because we cannot allow going back here no matter what! She has a

counteractant! She allowed it! This implies all we must do forthwith is find a way to- steadily. She grimaces... You cannot understand her!

This is what Naddalin who has been Nevaeh and pays with every girl she was ever with, also, this is what she does the girl that becomes lost in others and hid in others that need to be lost, the girl of many shared personae the girls like a hidden haunting ghost to everyone here in this world, to be ghosted when she changes to the new needed someone to leave that body with no explanations to anyone.

She lies and manages everyone throughout her. You must sojourn away from her- she is using you- she cannot be commissioned I just oscillate my head.

~*~

Nevaeh- Maiara Chenoa, is lying that is not true, it does not like I have stolen a baby body at birth with my soul, to find a new life, at all... my mother was my mother... and my dad and my sisters are my true sisters, I have real records showing this, I trusted her, do not believe her, she lost my trust, she made all this up to make me look bad. You must believe me.